

Double Helix

by rotarydialphone

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Summary: When a UNSC Spec Ops team is set on the trail of a rogue geneticist, one member deals with personal demons and finds comfort in an allied warrior who is faced with his own shattered past.

Post-war, OCs, canon characters in mention only. Rated for language, gore, and adult themes. COMPLETE.

## 1. Chapter 1

**\*\*Author's Note: \*\***This is a thorough revision of the story as previously published. To the newcomers, at the beginning of chapters which contain lemons (none here) there will be a warning.

The main pairing is between a human female and a Sangheili male (develops). Gross? Then don't read it.

**\*\*Notice: \*\***I do not own Halo, I just enjoy writing in its universe.

\* \* \*

><p>Prolog<p>

**\*\*17 October 2563**

>Procyon System<br>Boundary

>Undisclosed ONI facility <strong>\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*0200 Local/ 1400 Zulu\*\*

The lower floors of the facility were deserted. A shadowy form was caught in intermittent security lighting, a thin figure obscured by a long lab coat that fluttered behind like a cape as she moved hastily through the darkness of the hall. The air smelled of cheap industrial cleaner and as she approached a far door, the scent of pine and bleach mingled with the strong odor of overworked electrical equipment.

Pausing at a darkened doorway, the woman tapped at a security pad,

the yellow image of a German shepherd appearing on a small complementary holo platform before she had finished entering her code.

"Good morning, Doctor Jay," the image said without moving its mouth, "may I be of some assistance?"

"Is \_Deoxy\_ prepped?" Jay said in answer.

"Yes, Doctor."

"Good boy, Signe. Send \_all\_ of the Double Helix files to my data pad. If they want to take this from me, they can \_go fetch\_."

The AI's image flickered to orange and back at the command as a pneumatic lock hissed and Jay pushed through the door.

The electrical smell intensified and as Jay stepped into the room she felt as if she had walked through a barrier of heat. Cooling systems whirled around her, their exhaust fans pushing around stale air. Signe appeared at a platform near the lone terminal as Debra pecked at the screen.

"Doctor, where are we going?" the AI asked after a few moments, cocking its head to one side.

"\_We\_," Jay answered irritably, "are going as far away from this planet as \_Deoxy\_ is capable of taking us. Is Douglas and the team ready?"

"Yes, Doctor. They are standing by."

The terminal gave a chime and Jay looked over at the AI's projected image, sitting obediently on the holo platform.

"Signe," Jay said.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"\_Play dead\_."

The AI's image collapsed as electricity throughout the facility winked out. Jay could hear the labored, rhythmic thumping of the nearby backup generator trying to kick over. The floor beneath her feet shook with each unsuccessful effort.

Shards of yellow and orange collected into Signe's canine image on the holo platform. Smiling to herself, Jay ejected the glowing data chip. She tucked it into her pocket and retreated quickly back through the door to rush down the dark hallway to the stairwell.

After climbing three flights, Jay stepped from the ground floor access and trotted to the waiting cart. She climbed into the small vehicle and began zipping along the wide, dark halls quietly.

\_Deoxy\_ sat in the hanger bay, bright external lights casting the heavy science carrier in shades of gray and black as Jay turned the cart through a wide tunnel and drove straight for the waiting ramp. She parked the cart at the top and threw her legs over the side,

passing the data chip to a waiting technician.

"Get Signe back online," she ordered.

The man gave a single nod and scurried away. Jay stood from the cart and turned to a younger woman in a long white coat. The remaining members of her scientific team seemed to take a step back as Jay looked her senior research assistant up and down, her eyes settling on the swaddled bundle of a child sleeping in the woman's arms.

"Get rid of it," Jay said coolly.

Sandra Douglas gaped at her, "Debra, \_no\_," she pleaded.

"\_Yes\_," Jay hissed, "I have no further use for it. \_That\_ \_research\_ has yielded all it can. The child is no longer \_necessary\_."

The woman stared at her, mouth trembling, "She isn't just \_research\_."

"That's all \_it\_ ever was," Jay responded without inflection, pulling an M6Gcc Magnum from the pocket of her lab coat and aiming it at Sandra's head. The civilian compact version of the handgun was fitted with a bulbous silencer and Debra Jay looked down the combined length with detached annoyance at the other woman.

"I'm sorry, but I can't abide someone who has so clearly lost their objectivity."

Debra pulled the trigger and Doctor Douglas' head snapped back, a neat hole in her temple throwing a glob of blood skyward as the back of her head exploded in a spray of bone and brain matter across the wall behind. Sandra's body collapsed against the deck and a muffled, surprised pip erupted from the bundle still in her arms.

"Pity," Jay said casually, tucking the gun back in her pocket, "she had been so very \_useful\_."

The doctor looked to her remaining team, all carefully avoiding the sight of Douglas' rapidly draining body as cries and hiccups grew louder from the wiggling bundle on her chest, "Clean up that \_mess\_," Jay sneered, turning and walking away.

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter One<p>

\*\*17 October 2563

>Sol System<br>Earth

>Marine Special Operations Command Camp Odin<br>Immediate Ready  
Detachment Senior Enlisted Barracks

>1040 Local 1440 Zulu\*\*

A chime sounded, the succession of musical notes going completely unnoticed. After a few moments, the data pad lit from the cluttered bedside stand and Bleu projected himself from the surface. The cobalt image of a WWII era Marine paratrooper chewed heartily as if on a plug of chew, his digital lips turning up on one side in an expression of amusement.

"Hate to intrude," the AI said without inflection, a smile breaking fully across his face.

"You," the breathless voice of Gunnery Sergeant Theodor Danniskovovik answered, "son of a bitch."

Bleu folded his arms across his chest and shifted his image to one hip as a woman's lusty chuckle rose muffled from the bunk beneath the old ODS.

Teddy threw the sheet aside, revealing his scarred and heavily tattooed body slicked with sweat; the pale skin of his thickly muscled back marred with fresh scratches. Long, dark, female legs were wrapped around his waist and the woman's laughter broke with a low groan as Teddy shifted.

"Ma'am," Bleu gave gentlemanly nod.

"\_Five minutes, Bleu\_," the ODS snarled through clenched teeth, swatting clumsily at the data pad just out of reach.

The AI lifted his eyes toward the ceiling, heaving an annoyed sigh before he winked away.

\* \* \*

><p>It was 1058 when Danniskovovik and Chief Warrant Officer Elizabeth Steele walked up to Launch Deck 4. Bleu was projected from a small platform near the deck partition, arms tightly folded across his chest, shaking his head.<p>

Steele breezed past the AI, a half smirk playing at her full lips. Despite the smile, she was an imposing figure. Though, at five foot ten, her slender frame set her well short of the burly Gunnery Sergeant following her.

The two deposited their bug out gear on the ramp of a waiting D77 TC Dropship. The rear of the old Pelican was marked with the craft's call sign: W-289. The busty vestige of a retro pin-up girl seated astride an ANVIL-II missile was plastered to one side. The banner beneath the hand-painted image read \_Miss Kitty\_.

"That's a hair more than \_five minutes\_, Gunny" Bleu said.

Danniskovovik huffed and Steele threw her head back and laughed, "Don't get your parachute in a wad," she chuckled, "we're in under call-out."

The Immediate Ready Detachment was a small company of select Special Operations teams. Select: because they were comprised of Spec Ops Marines from various backgrounds who had no family ties: no known next of kin. For the IRD, there would be no long good-bye's to spouses and kids; no tearful hugs on the tarmac; no one for the team to phone and tell they were being shipped God-only-knew-where to do Command-only-knew-what; and no death notifications to weeping mothers and spouses should any of them not come back. And, no augmentations required.

Twenty-four four-man teams comprised the IRD and were on rotating

call-out when not on active assignment; each with their own dropship and crew. Long gone were the days of on-call team leaders languishing in a ready room waiting for an assignment to come down from on high. Now, Zeta's team leader could spend half the morning getting her brains banged out by her second-in-command and still be ready to roll in under thirty minutes.

"What are they doing?" Corporal Jeffrey Collins asked, motioning down the launch deck from his position inside the Pelican's troop bay. The baby-faced, freckle-nosed crew chief looked barely old enough to have joined the service.

\_Miss Kitty's\_ pilot, Staff Sergeant Princeton King, and co-pilot, Sergeant Jose Antonio walked the craft's length from the forward section and paused near Teddy and Beth. King propped his lanky frame against the Pelican's interior flank and Antonio screwed up the soft, boyish features of his face.

All eyes had drifted down the faded concrete flight deck to behold Staff Sergeant Maggie Whittaker, bug out gear in tow, carrying Sergeant Paul Sanders piggy-back style as she hustled their way. Sanders whooped, holding his assault helmet aloft like the sword of a charging knight. Whittaker looked like a mule, overloaded and saddled with an obnoxious rider.

"I don't think I wanna' know," Teddy said matter-of-factly.

"Maggie lost the bet," Bleu answered.

A collective \_ah \_rose from the group as they nodded in understanding. Whittaker stomped heavily to them and dumped Sanders and his gear unceremoniously on the Pelican's ramp. Paul rolled to his feet gracefully as Maggie straightened, stretching her back.

"Lay off the cheeseburgers," she puffed, "\_fat ass\_."

"Loser," he responded, gathering his gear. Standing a few feet up the ramp he was only inches taller than she was.

"Guess the news feed mentioned \_the kid\_ again, huh?" PK drawled with a grin.

The comment garnered a slew of discontented groans from everyone but Sanders, who flashed his deceptively charming smile: all perfect teeth and deeply dimpled cheeks.

"Damn right," Paul chirped, "Ol' Mags here thought that nugget had been mined for all it was worth."

It was a yearly wager and everyone knew Maggie \_should \_have been right. But, the media just couldn't pass up a chance to bring up ONI's failures: and when better than the yearly blurb on the anniversary of Admiral Parangosky's death? There weren't enough tasteful articles, smart collections of sound bites, or regal photos to dampen the blow of the exposé the kid's mother had given. The-Admiral-who-still-haunted-people's-dreams had been in the grave less than a month when David James Parangosky had disappeared from the grounds of Nimitz Intelligence Academy without a trace. And his mom didn't take well to the agency trying to keep a lid on it. Seven

years later and ONI was no closer to knowing what had happened to him or living down the failed cover-up. It wasn't the department's most devastating blunder, but in almost every mention of Parangosky, no matter how big or small, the media managed to work it in.

"It was on the vid in the day room just before Bleu called us out," Sanders held up his hands, recalling the headline while dropping his voice and taking on the cadence of a news reporter, "'\_It would be just weeks later that the department would be shadowed by the disappearance of the Admiral's great-grand-nephew\_,'" he pointed to Maggie with both index fingers, triumphant smile on his face, "cue the kid's cadet picture."

"You're such an ass-hole," she responded, raking her fingers through her short, platinum hair to comb down wayward tufts.

"The ass-hole that didn't have to carry \_you\_," he laughed, shouldering his small duffel and strolling onto the Pelican.

Everyone followed suit, stowing their gear as PK and Tony took position in the cockpit and began the last round of AI assisted, pre-flight re-checks. Collins took his place just aft of the forward bulkhead, strapping in before clicking on his data pad and scanning the final rundown. Satisfied, the crew chief tucked the pad into a chest pocket and gave PK a thumbs-up.

"You're hooking up with \_Hell Hath No Fury\_," Bleu's stated, "AI of Hilda."

"See ya' on the flip side, Bleu," PK called, giving a curt wave as the cargo door began easing closed.

"Ya'll be nice, now. That's a \_whole lot\_ of woman," Bleu said in salutation.

Sanders grinned to himself, "I like the sound of \_that\_."

\* \* \*

><p>The <em>UNSC Hell Hath No Fury <em>was poised in synchronous orbit, silently waiting as \_Miss Kitty \_made her approach. The Corvette-class vessel was of the older variety. Never hardened by combat, she was almost pristine with sharp edges and long, unmarred lines.

"Check it out," King called, jutting his chin toward the forward window.

A battle-scarred Type-52 Phantom drifted from \_Fury's \_bay several hundred feet ahead and began a lazy descent.

Steele gave Teddy a look, one dark eyebrow raised.

"Mmm," Antonio hummed, "Smells like \_polÃ-tica\_."

"Fucking A," Sanders grunted in annoyance.

"Bearing the Arbiter's insignia no less," Maggie said.

"Wonderful," Teddy snorted, "you know what that means: best behavior kiddies."

"Shit," Sanders muttered.

"Fuck," PK whined.

"\_Cagar\_," Tony sighed.

Maggie and Beth rolled their eyes as Collins laughed to himself and Teddy shook his head.

When \_Miss Kitty \_set down in \_Fury's \_bay everyone felt the familiar jolt as landing gear was secured to the deck. PK and Tony busied themselves with systems checks as Collins began going over his own post-flight list and the team began retrieving their gear. While waiting for the green light to disembark, Zeta stood in stoic silence.

Collins looked up suddenly and pulled a latch on the bulkhead. The Pelican's bay door began to lower smoothly. As he opened his mouth to speak the data pad in his hand winked and the crimson image of a buxom valkyrie in full Norse battle armor grasping with a tall spear projected from its surface.

"Whoa," Jeff yelped.

Everyone tuned to see the AI who gave a genteel nod in greeting.

PK leaned from the pilot's seat to get a peek, "\_Nice\_," he commented, noticing Teddy's disapproving glare, "to meet you, ma'am," he hastily added, retreating back to his seat.

"Zeta," the AI said.

"Hilda," Steele responded.

"Yes, now that we're done with the pleasantries \_here\_, Captain McGregor is expecting you in his ready room. \_All \_of you," she said shifting the image of her formidable, armored bulk to Collins.

"Us?" he questioned, a look of confused panic washing across his face, "But, we're not," he pointed helplessly at Zeta, "and we've got post-flight checks and&€|"

The spear in Hilda's grasp disappeared and she snapped her fingers, "Done. \_Miss Kitty \_is just fine, gentlemen."

"You heard her," King said wriggling from the cockpit, followed by a grinning Antonio.

The flight crew quickly secured their gear and joined Zeta outside the Pelican. Everyone made their way to a large set of double doors as Hilda waited patiently at a holo platform to one side. Collins looked decidedly uncomfortable, giving \_Miss Kitty \_a long glance as he brought up the rear.

PK stepped back to slap an arm around the young crew chief's shoulders, "She'll be fine. C'mon man, when do \_we \_ever get invited to come along?"

"Yeah," Tony added, giving Collins a playful swat in the stomach, "you can come back and check on your lady later."

Everyone filed into the wide hall and Hilda projected her image, slightly smaller than life-size, to lead them. She had been informed early on that her chosen form was much less intimidating if portrayed as unnaturally short.

The AI paused at a lift and indicated it with a tip of her winged helm and everyone obediently loaded up.

"Your quarters will be on C-Deck," she stated evenly, "Would you prefer to drop your gear first?"

"Not necessary," Steele answered, "Hate to keep the skipper waiting."

Hilda smiled, "Very well."

The ride was spent in silence and when the lift came to a stop the troop piled out, following Hilda's image to a portal sealed with antique, wooden doors.

"McGregor \_detests \_formalities," the AI warned, "Please bear this in mind as you enter," she added evenly before disappearing.

The crew dropped their gear in a neat line against the wall and worked together to quickly straighten uniforms before Beth pushed open one of the ornately carved doors and everyone filed in.

A startling young, red-headed man in Captain's whites was seated at a large, hardwood table. His elbows were propped on the polished tabletop and his chin was resting impishly in his hands as he looked at a small projection of Hilda prattling on before him. Seeing the team and crew come in, McGregor lifted his head and smiled broadly, straightening impeccably in his chair.

No one noticed.

All eyes were focused on the Sangheili seated one chair over and to the Captain's right. The dark creature was in sleek charcoal armor indicative of a Special Operations Commander and watched them with bright orange, soulless reptilian eyes.

As McGregor moved to stand everyone seemed to recover their bearings at once and stiffened as if on cue.

The Captain waved a dismissive hand, "Join us; have a seat," he beckoned.

Whittaker and Sanders exchanged awkward glances with the flight crew as Steele and Danniskovovik took cautions, but compliant, steps to the table. Everyone took a chair, opposite McGregor and the Sangheili, and did their best not to look as if the situation was completely uncomfortable.

"You've no doubt got a lot of questions," McGregor began, patting the tabletop softly, "and we've got a lot to cover to bring you up to speed," he looked at the group with a disarming grin.



"Sir," Beth spoke, her eyes darting back and forth from the affable captain to the Elite who had yet to move anything other than his eyes—she couldn't even be sure the thing was even breathing, "Hilda indicated that you don't like formalities, so may I presume I am permitted to speak freely?"

McGregor leaned back in his seat, tipping the chair on two legs and lacing his fingers behind his head, "Of course."

"This," she motioned to the Marines seated to her left, "is IRD Special Operations Team Zeta and our flight crew. We are all on board Hell Hath No Fury; you're Captain McGregor and that," she indicated the AI hologram, "is Hilda."

The Captain nodded in agreement while she spoke, righting his chair and clasping his hands as if anticipating what was to come next.

"The only question that remains is: who in the hell is \*\*that\*\*?" she finished, cocking her head to meet the Sangheili's chilling stare.

McGregor slapped the polished tabletop with open palms and chuckled, "I knew I was gonna' like you," he held out a hand and gestured neatly to the Elite, "This is Allied Forces Command Officer Iruu 'Loram: former Covenant Special Operations, now one of the many Covenant Separatists who are working under asylum."

The Elite snorted like an angry bull, still holding eye contact with Beth.

"Perhaps we should begin from the beginning," Hilda suggested, leaning her image in between the gazes of the Chief Warrant Officer and the Elite Commander.

"Right," Teddy drawled, reaching beneath the table to give Steele's thigh a reassuring squeeze.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you please," the AI said, snapping her fingers and pulling Steele and 'Loram reluctantly from their silent standoff, "As some of you are aware, in late 2552 ONI launched a genetic and biological research project code-named Double Helix following significant contact with the organism known as the Flood. Originally based on Earth, the project was moved to the armored research vessel, Deoxy, in the fall of 2557 when it reached a critical phase of testing. Deoxy and her crew set up a small continuing research and testing facility on the remains of the planet Boundary. Facility completion and project reengagement occurred in the summer of 2558. From the beginning, operations have been cataloged and overseen by a Generation One Unconventional Artificial Intelligence self identified as Signe..."

"Unconventional?" Sanders interrupted.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"That's spook-talk for illegal," McGregor clarified in a good-natured tone, "Signe was cloned from the brain of astrological engineer, and condemned murderer, Linbergh Signe Tollovinski. Of

course, the mad genius who completed Einstein's Unfinished Equation and helped birth the mathematics that gave us the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine was executed and interred in 2250. So, they had to dig him up to get the DNA; and grow a brain in a lab first."

Paul practically turned green at the thought.

"\_Mierda\_," Tony muttered, his chubby cheeks reddening when he realized he had said it out loud.

"Indeed," McGregor chuckled.

"Captain, please," Hilda huffed, placing her fists on her ample hips.

He reigned in his laughter and waved for her to continue.

"One of Signe's fragments was retained at ONI headquarters receiving data and keeping the department updated while his primary operating functions maintained \_Deoxy\_ and assisted the scientists and crew. At 1310 hours Zulu on this date, the first of ONI's Enhanced Long-Range Scanning Probes made a sweep of Boundary and the data that returned wasâ€|disturbing. Even with the support of Signe's ONI fragment the probes were unable to breach the facility. The AI's matrix would not respond to previously imbedded commands and, receiving an abbreviated report on the \_complication\_, Lord Hood pulled the plug on Double Helix and put a leash on ONI. At 1350 hours, we attempted to override Signe from headquarters and at 1403 the fragment on our end was terminated."

Everyone sat in silenceâ€|not missing her use of the words '\_we' \_and '\_our'\_.

"And, it was not \_just\_ severed from the operating system," Hilda continued, a hint of unease creeping into her voice, "An AI may discard hundreds, something thousands, of fragments during their operational lifetime. Choosing to abandon one is of little consequence, except, Signe didn't just cease exchanging information with the fragment or purge it and reduce it to base functionsâ€|in a manner of speaking, he \_cannibalized \_it."

"Sweet Jesus," PK whispered.

Hilda nodded slowly as McGregor leaned his elbows on the tabletop, "The Chief Geneticist and program leader for Double Helix was Doctor Debra Elise Jay. Handpicked by Admiral Parangosky in 2551 to take over the Genetic and Biological Research Division, Jay oversaw the extraction and sequencing of Tollovinski's genetic profile which eventually yielded the brain later imprinted to create the AI assigned to her pet program."

"If Signe came online with Double Helix, that would put him at least \_four years \_past the rampancy threshold," Teddy mused.

"Correct, Gunny," Hilda seemed to perk up, "While I am unable to access the \_full\_ record on Signe's creation, it is widely presumed Doctor Jay discovered a way to contain, and perhaps exploit, rampancy which she kept undisclosed."

Danniskovovik scratched the top of his head and gave Steele a

wide-eyed look.

"And that's just part of the bigger problem," McGregor added, "based on additional scans cross-referenced with data from other systems; ONI is comfortable with the assessment that Jay went rogue \_years\_ ago."

Hilda motioned to 'Loram, "And that would be why \_he\_ is here. The probes also revealed the slip-space signature for \_Deoxy's\_ \_accompaniment\_ \_all over\_ \_adjoining\_ systems in the outer colonial region and beyond. It is feared Jay was conducting unauthorized research and foraging the lost colonies for survivors as well as taking non-human test subjects from \_other\_ locations. And these concerns are not without merit. Since the probes began sweeping the outlying areas we have amassed substantial chatter about abductions. Cross-reference \_that\_ information with official reports collected from allied and enemy sources, and it paints a potentially devastating picture."

"Devastating to the alliance," Steele said.

"\_Very\_," Hilda agreed, "The probes show that \_Deoxy\_ entered slip-space from the surface at 1430 hours Zulu on \_this\_ \_date\_ and has yet to reemerge on any outlying scans."

"So, we're chasing down a fruitcake wielding an \_Unconventional\_ AI capable of cannibalizing itself and keeping secrets from ONI?" Sanders asked.

"No," Hilda said with a droll expression, "For now, you're going to the facility on Boundary so we can attempt to retrieve what Jay left behind. If my suspicions are correct, we may have more to worry about than a security \_fragment.\_"

"Meaning?" Teddy asked suspiciously.

"Meaning: there is concern that Debra Jay cloned Signe and somehow had \_two\_ \_AIs\_ working together," McGregor said, "ONI and Lord Hood are convinced that retrievingâ€|\_whatever it is\_â€|on Boundary may show just how Jay pulled this off without anyone noticing."

"Whatever is on Boundary has effectively locked itself and the structure down," Hilda continued, "No attempts at penetrating the firewall have been successful, no matter how \_many\_ \_smart\_ AI's ONI has thrown at it. The only area I have been able to breach is the sub-basement, not that there is any \_substantial\_ information there: the remainder of the facility will remain off-limits so long as Signe is in active control."

"You're talking about the \_manual\_ \_override\_ of a security fragment that sophisticated?" Steele leaned back and folded her arms over her chest.

"In a manner of speaking: yes. Zeta simply has to get one of \_my\_ fragments into the facility and upload it into the system: I can take care of the rest."

"The UNSC has been fortifying the alliance for over a decade while ONI has beenâ€|" McGregor cast a glance at the Sangheili, "doing

\_things \_behind everyone's backs. Quite frankly, we don't know what to expect. In the spirit of transparency and maintaining the alliance Hood had a very \_open\_ and diplomatic chat with 'Vadam andâ€|for lack of a better way to put it: the Arbiter insisted that future cooperation depended on him \_lending \_us Command Officer 'Loram."

"He's an assassin," Whittaker said with a touch of novelty.

The Elite growled, the tiny hint of a smile pulling at his mandibles.

"He was, once upon a time," Hilda stated, "Now he is here to insure that no \_other \_ugly surprises emerge from this\_â€|mess\_."

There was a long silence as everyone mulled the information over.

Finally, Steele cleared her throat, "How long until we reach Boundary?"

McGregor flashed his teeth, "Hilda will have us there in just under twelve once we reach the launch zoneâ€|that'll be in, oh," he glanced at his watch, "about ten minutes. \_Fury \_has an upgraded drive. Not as fancy as some of the bigger, more sophisticated tugs, but it'll do," he winked conspiratorially.

"Days?" Sanders asked.

The jump from Earth to Boundary took well over two months with standard translight drives. While he was itchy about spending almost two weeks in operational limbo, the idea of cutting a jump by three quarters was impressive.

Hilda shook her head, "\_Hours\_, Sergeant."

"Hot damn," PK whooped, "That is my kind of woman."

The Captain chuckled, "If all minds are clear: I'll consider this briefing concluded. Everything on this ship is at your disposal. Hilda here can help with any additional questions and she'll let you know when we enter slip, but I promise, ladies and gentlemen, you won't even notice."

## 2. Chapter 2

### Chapter Two

\*\*18 October 2563

>Procyon System<br>Synchronous orbit over Boundary

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*0330 Zulu/ 1530 Local\*\*

Iruu 'Loram slowly paced his quarters: four steps in one direction then four steps in the other. Despite a decade of living on the Sangheili Allied Station near the Embassy on Earth, and coordinating local training and assignments that furthered the alliance, he found the idea of interacting so closely with humans disturbing. Circumstances being what they were, he was not one to complain.

He walked the room, small by Sangheili standards, a final time then paused to pull a silken bag from the top drawer of a short dresser. After lighting a set of ornate candles, he unrolled a simple prayer mat and retrieved four stone figures from the silk bag, arranging them carefully before the candles.

Folding his hands, he rested his bowed forehead on his knuckles, \_Ancestors, give me strengthâ€|\_he silently began the prayer.

He knew he had been chosen for this assignment because of his experience in Covenant Army Special Operations, and the tradition of sending senior officers on select missions of importance. But, he had been out of mission status for the better part of eleven years and had never before been sent without a team of his own skilled warriors. He was convinced he was not going to enjoy this.

In what little time he had observed the humans he would be working with, he found some of them inordinately preoccupied with discussing the intimate details of their private lives; and there was the fact that he remained personally appalled they subjected their women to combat. He knew these things from previous contact before the Great Schism and general chatter around the allied station, but his position on Earth had never put him in a situation in which to have to otherwise witness it.

He had sat with the human team for less than an hour as they worked with the construct on a plan of action. Getting into the facility appeared to be basic infiltration and \_all\_ Iruu had learned was that this mission was going to test his skills at exercising diplomacy.

The remainder of the time in slipstream he had spent in prayer and deep meditation, preparing himself mentally for what he was likely to encounter on the planet the humans called \_Boundary\_.

While the members of Zeta had been content to spend time in each other's company Iruu had determined to maintain his distance. From what little he saw of it, their time was devoted to discussing some ridiculous human game; eating unsavory-looking food; and either sleeping or readying their weapons while making entirely too much noise. It was clear his presence had taken the team by surprise and that the Steele woman found him as distasteful as he found the presence of females on this mission offensive.

Isolation was a fact of his existence he had long become accustomed to, but being the lone Sangheili on a ship full of humans was most unsettling. On Earth, he could focus on maintaining peace and order by doing his part to insure Sangheili allied forces were ready and available to assist the humans with keeping civilian and former military asylum seekers in line. This required absolutely no contact with the humans on his part, and that was what he preferred. He answered directly to Sangheili Military Commander Rtas 'Vadum, and vicariously to the Arbiter in certain circumstances. 'Sraom and 'Taham remained the Earth-side figureheads of the alliance working and residing in the Embassyâ€|though, Iruu could not fathom why they would wish to remain on the human planet. He supposed \_someone\_ \_had\_ to maintain a direct connection and insure a peaceful coexistence, although, if the option existed for him as it did for the Ambassadors, 'Loram would have gladly gone home.

Finishing his prayer, Iruu neatly returned his items to their appropriate places and snuffed out the candles.

Sighing wearily, he collected his gear and summoned the resolve to walk out of his quarters and wind his way down to the hangar.

\* \* \*

><p>The trip from <em>Fury <em>to Boundary was quieter than Zeta was use to. Instead of the dark and sometimes dirty joking that went on to sooth nerves the only words spoken were between King and Antonio. Even they kept their discussions to clipped remarks on the descent. Hilda, or the fragment which she had delegated for the trip, was also remarkably silent. As the Pelican dropped from a controlled fall through the planet's atmosphere and began to sink toward the surface everyone seemed to be in their own silent moments of getting mentally prepared.

Iruu found the silence more befitting a team of professionals. He stood near the closed bay door holding onto an overhead tether, finding the thought of perching his behind in one of the craft's troop seats completely undignified.

The human team was fitted in black body armor which overlay standard drab gray tactical uniforms. They sat with faces partially concealed by the dark visors of CH252 assault helmets; each armed with a rifle slung across their backs and a pistol holster to a thigh. The Sangheili was clad in black armor that boasted his, once coveted, position in Covenant Special Operations. The dense plating was secured atop a black body suit. His systems had been integrated with the human AI so he could receive the same heads-up information as Zeta during the mission, displayed on the inside of the black lenses that covered his eyes. He was armed with a single plasma rifle and two energy swords.

Boundary, what everyone could see of it, was a dust bowl of white sand and scrubby foliage, punctuated by giant, broken shards of milky glass. The facility was a white-washed and faded hodge-podge of mass, pre-produced, industrial panels and cinder blocks; well concealed amongst the blinding glare of sand and sparkle of glass. To look at it, one would think more of an emergency bunker than a science facility.

\_Miss Kitty\_ set well away from the building in the dry remains of a gaping drainage culvert. Leaves and dried tumbles of scrub grass danced in the Pelican's wake. A whirlwind of white silt was pushed away on a plume as the troop bay began to yawn open.

Zeta and 'Loram stepped from the craft as the flight crew began post-flight checks before going immediately into pre-flight prep.

"The access point is through there," Hilda stated, referring to the expansive opening of a concrete tunnel.

Twisted metal grating hung from the curved opening, dangling three-quarters of the way down. Aft of the Pelican, the wide, man-made crevasse stretched some 100 meters and fanned into the dry remains of a bay.

As they stepped off, 'Loram and Zeta were dwarfed by steeply sloped concrete walls; sand and bits of glass leaked from the cracked surface, having settled into piles that dotted the passage.

"The facility was set on the remaining foundation of Vicar Medical Center. This is an overflow runoff that connects to the primary sanitation drainage for the city and surrounding townships. There is an access point that adjoins the underground operating station for the hospital. The facility sub-basement can be reached through a sealed maintenance shaft," Hilda explained.

"\_Sanitation drainage\_," Sanders sang as he brought up the rear.

Zeta followed 'Loram and they walked into the cavernous channel. Bright green, triangular markers indicated the way to the destination on HUDs. A few hundred feet in and the humans had to switch on personal infrared lighting, allowing their night vision to penetrate the suffocating gloom. Iruu strolled forward, his visual acuity almost completely unaffected by the darkness.

Footsteps echoed and returned in a nauseous chorus as they walked the smooth concrete and carefully laid stone for what felt like miles. Eventually, the passage bifurcated in a sweeping archway, befuddlingly decorative for something intended to drain sewage. The tunnels were barred with metal access grates but 'Loram barely slowed his pace as he approached the juncture that would walk them under the facility. He drew the hilt of an energy sword and the blade activated in a flickering hiss of white and crimson. Zeta watched as Iruu made a quick, sweeping cut through the grate then gave it a solid kick, causing an oblong section collapsed inward.

As the group walked through the opening and continued down the tunnel, Sanders trotted up alongside Maggie, giving her arm a nudge and nodding towards 'Loram, "You know what \_that\_ means, don't you?"

His words bounced around despite his attempt to whisper.

Maggie snorted a laugh, "Yeah, it means he was a badass who could skin you, \_before\_ you could manage to die."

From ahead, Iruu swiveled his head and regarded the perceptive human female from the corner of his eye.

The faint red glow of 'Loram's armor betrayed a wicked Sangheili grin.

Sanders slowed his pace at the sight, "Uh, that's one way to put it," he gulped.

Long, silent hours of walking passed before they neared the aperture that would take them to the operating station access. From ahead, Iruu came to a slow stop, his heavy footfalls droning against the concrete. Steele and Danniskovovik walked to his side, sweeping the tunnel with the infrared beams of their rifles as Whittaker and Sanders came up behind.

"\_My God\_," Maggie whispered, breaking the uneasy silence, "where did

they all \_come from\_?"

Danniskovovik gave an almost imperceptible, sad shake of his head, "Probably just poor bastards trying to ride out the Covenant attack."

Ahead of them, knotted in clusters still huddled against the walls, half-skeletonized and flash-mummified human remains lined the tunnel. By the hundreds skulls with empty eye sockets and mouths open in eternal screams gaped at them. Some of the withered bodies were clearly holding one another or cowering against their neighbors.

"The access point to the old operating station is thirty meters ahead," Hilda said, giving everyone's HUD marker an impatient wink.

Iruu emitted what sounded like a long, deep sigh before stepping into the tunnel, carefully choosing his footing.

With eyes ahead on the objective they all did their best not to let their gazes linger on the mass of abandoned causalities that littered the path.

Reaching the access point, 'Loram looked up the stone wall as Zeta cast their lights along a metal stepladder that terminated at a large, circular hatch in the ceiling, ten meters up.

Steele slung her weapon and climbed.

She found the release crusted in charred rust and wound up tangling her legs around the ladder and hammering at the release with the butt of her rifle until it gave way. She pushed the hatch and it yawned open. Retrieving her pistol, Beth shimmied up further and peeped into a room of the old operating station, casting the LED from her weapon around. She tipped her head to the team below and jerked her chin for them to follow before holstering her sidearm and climbing through.

Whittaker, Sanders, and Danniskovovik climbed up, leaving 'Loram in the grizzly tunnel below.

The small room of the old operating station was no less disturbing. Withered figures huddled under warped and melted work stations and clung to one another against walls. A delicate layer of charred dust covered everything and broken bits of glass and busted tile creaked and popped under foot.

Paul leaned to peer back down into the tunnel, careful not to take aim at the Sangheili. The Elite Command Officer crouched, shifting his weight from one foot to the other like a cat about to spring. Sanders registered what he was doing when Iruu tore upward, launching himself partially through the hatch.

Shuffling back, the Sergeant watched as 'Loram caught himself, his claws tearing gashes in the crumbling, industrial laminate as he gracefully pulled his legs up through the hatch. Sanders looked back down the hole, then at the Elite, and back again.

The team moved from the room, their feet leaving various smudges and



boot prints in the collected dust. The hall which greeted them was littered with more remains. Everything smelled lightly burned and musty, like an old fireplace and a mildewed shower. Hilda directed them to the maintenance tunnel access and Teddy gave it a swift kick. He hunkered down and crab-walked through, finding the narrow passage, thankfully, clear of shriveled cadavers. He waddled the low tunnel, broad shoulders bumping the sides, until it made an abrupt ninety-degree, vertical turn. Standing in the narrow space, Danniskovovik climbed the small utility ladder until he could go no further. He had to wedge himself in the space, one foot on the ladder and the other planted against the opposite wall to hold himself aloft, while he set the charges before maneuvering back down and out.

After Teddy emerged, Zeta and 'Loram waited. There was a hiss and a sharp \_pop\_ then Danniskovovik crawled back down the shaft and pushed at the shattered slab of blocks, shoving his way through the sub-basement floor of the facility and waiting for everyone to join him.

'Loram had to crawl awkwardly through the passage and wriggle around the ninety-degree turn, then claw his way to and through the opening. Pulling himself into a room full of discarded equipment, he cocked his head to one side and listened.

"Does anyone else hear that?" Maggie asked.

"Yep," Sanders answered.

The distant sound of an enraged dog zealously barking echoed from a far door.

Following the sound, Zeta and 'Loram moved from the storage room and into a wide hall. The barking grew louder and, rounding a corner, they found a heavy door with the small yellow projection of a German shepherd, hackles raised, snarling and growling at them from a flickering, antiquated holo platform.

"That," Hilda said, "would be Signe."

"Signe's a \_dog\_?" Paul gave a confused expression.

"\_This \_Signe is a dog," she corrected, "AIs chose a form which is representative of how they see \_themselves\_. Given available data, I find the choice quite appropriate."

"And disturbing," Maggie added.

Steele pulled the chip bearing Hilda's fragment from her breast pocket. The image of Signe quieted long enough to sniff then began snarling again. The AI made a show of snapping towards Beth's hand, but when the chip slid home the image collapsed and the platform winked out completely.

"Hilda?" Teddy called, giving the dark projector a tap.

The platform flickered red for a second and a faint green marker appeared on HUDs, but Hilda didn't otherwise appear or respond. Pneumatic locks hissed and the door rattled. Sanders and Whittaker shrugged at each other as Steele pulled the door open revealing a

wide stairwell. She took the steps two at a time with the rest of Zeta and 'Loram at her heels. At the upper landing, Beth eased open a door and looked out. The holo platform in the outer hall flashed and waivered in shades of yellow and red but remained empty as everyone filed past.

A sharp, electrical \_pop \_emanated from somewhere within the bowels of the building and a tide of winking security lights washed down the hall as overhead bulbs kicked on. In the distance, everyone could hear the labored \_whump, whump, whump \_of a generator as it began trying to kick over.

Comms crackled and the team drew up. Teddy cocked his head to the side and clamped a hand over one ear of his helmet, smashing the audio piece against his head while he strained to listen.

"...ger bayâ€|Signe'sâ€|agmentâ€|lone tryingâ€|" Hilda's voice called, sounding faint and far away through the static, "urityâ€|ideâ€|"

Zeta exchanged blank looks.

"Sounds like Signe's giving Hilda one hell of a hard time," Teddy mused.

A second, flickering marker winked on HUDs, almost overlapping the first, and Steele stepped off.

"Whatever it is she needs from us, let's get it over with," Beth called over her shoulder.

Empty halls brought them to another stairwell and the team climbed. The first marker swiveled at a door on the next landing while the second marker continued pointing up.

Without breaking stride, Steele motioned to the door with her rifle, "Gunny, take Sanders," she said, rounding the stairs, still climbing.

This turn of events gave 'Loram pause as he made the landing. Through the slowly closing door he could see the two human males, one distinctly larger than the other, as they moved stealthily down a gray hall dotted with intermittent lighting. Overhead, the two females' footsteps padded up the stairwell sending down a melody of dull echoes.

Iruu's left upper mandible twitched as he mulled this over. Finally, with an annoyed snort, he began climbing the stairs. The men could fend for themselves. It may have hurt the Sangheili's remaining scrap of male pride to be following the women around but if they were harmed on this mission in his absence what was left of his personal sense of honor would never survive.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Alpha Augarae System  
>Outside the Origami Asteroid Filed<br>\*\_\*\*UNSC Research Carrier  
Deoxy\*\_\*\*  
><strong>\*\_\*\*0510 Zulu\*\_\*\*

Doctor Debra Jay stood watching as the meager crew milled about \_Deoxy's \_hangar. From her vantage point on a second level platform, she could see the remaining members of her scientific and expeditionary teams, less than a fraction of what she had initially been sent to Boundary with, as they assisted in loading or strapped into two of \_Deoxy's \_four Pelicans.

"Doctor," Signe's voice called without inflection, "we are nearing suitable launch proximity, I suggestâ€|"

Jay raised a stiff hand and cut the AI off, "That will be all, Signe."

He had yet to brave appearing on any of the holo platforms and instead opted to remain a disembodied voice. Since being downloaded anew into \_Deoxy's \_systems, he felt something was not quite right, as if he were forgetting somethingâ€|but, he knew that was silly, he couldn't \_forget \_things. A constructed intelligence's matrix did not \_work \_that way.

Signe repeated multiple calculations and systems checks to sooth the unfamiliar apprehension, and though he found himself feeling better, he could not bring himself to manifest and look Jay in the eye. AIs didn't have \_eyes \_so there would be nothing for her to seeâ€|yet, he was overcome with a sense of guilt that he didn't understand and feared Jay would be able to detect and interpret.

Although he had inspected his routines thousands of times and found no indication of corruption, he was certain she had become aware of \_something \_she was not telling himâ€|and that she was unhappy.

Had he done something wrong? Was he somehow being punished?

Then again, humans were notoriously moody and quirkyâ€|perhaps she was exhibiting grief over losing the facility and so much of her physical research. But, he had saved all of the notes and schematics, and they were neatly catalogued and readily accessible, and the viable cultures had been securedâ€|

\_She sacrificed them\_â€|Signe heard his own voice, shrill and distant, scream.

While performing a thousand other tasks, the AI split a tiny portion of his processing capacity off and gave chase. The phantom tone hurled uncharacteristic obscenities and demanding taunts as Signe found himself routed through every frequency of his memory all the way down to his matrix.

And then, it was as if it were never there.

The AI made a few turns around his core, peeping in digital files and looking under the proverbial rugs of his existence. He thought hard, and listened, trying to make it make sense. Signe was certain it had been \_his \_voiceâ€|but, that was not \_him \_saying those ugly thingsâ€|

\_Because it is me\_, \_but not me\_, \_the AI found himself, for the first time, baffled by the lack of logic in the answer he found.

He mulled this over, deciding the closest approximation he could make

to what this caused him to feel was the human notion of fear. Now, he understood what Doctor Douglas meant when she said she felt scared and alone. The only person who could understand, or explain what was happening to him was Doctor Jay, and she was now distant and angry.

Sandra Douglas â€|Sandra isn't here. \_

There was a gap in Signe's memory which he couldn't account for, bits of information that didn't quite fit together. Sandra had loved somethingâ€|no, someoneâ€|

Sandra is dead, the voice screeched through static, dead because of you.\_

He pursued the sound again and, splitting off multiple bits of processing, cornered the belligerent fragment and firewalled it. Signe tucked the captured information away, storing it safely for later analysisâ€|or maybe never analysis. As much as his information seeking mind wanted desperately to know why he was chasing his own literal tails what he really wanted was for Doctor Jay to say he was a good boy\_,\_ again.

But, she was just standing there, leaned against the railing.

Looking down at the teams who were now strapped inside the dropships, Jay propped her hands against the smooth, curved surface of the rail and slowly cocked her head to one side, the soft features of her oval face not betraying a single emotion.

Minor setbacks, she thought, softly drumming her fingers in annoyance.

She was pushing forty, still very young for a scientist of her standing. Yet, here she was, at what should have been the pinnacle of her personal research, starting from scratch on critical but secondary details. The teams had their orders, all she could do now was hope that those she had chosen to spare were competent enough to follow them to the letter.\_

Jay furrowed her thinly plucked brows and pursed her lips, turning from the railing and stepping through a blast door that sealed behind her.

"Signe," she snapped.

"Yes, Doctor," he tried not to sound hurt and afraid, putting forth his most convincingly obedient tone.

"Launch the crews when ready," she said absently.

Signe began the launch sequences for the dropships and, finding no life-signs inside the hangar, sealed the bulkheads and began purging the atmosphere. He would be piloting the vessels to designated locations in the field, well, fragments of him would be, and overseeing their movements. Jay had given them a strict timeline and Signe's fragments were to extract the Pelicans, with or without the crew, so that they would return in time for the next slipspace jump. So much of what he was doing was routine but so much of it felt

somehow \_wrong\_.

The AI was drawn sharply from his numerous, and simultaneous, calculations, functions, and contemplation of various human theologies on ethical behavior by the sudden and unbearable sensation of stinging numbness. It was horrifying and emanated from the security fragment on Boundary. He had earlier assessed that there was a human presence near the facility but that was of no consequence given his fragments capacity to maintain lockdown. But, thisâ€¦\_this \_felt as if a fiery cord had been tethered around the fragment and was attempting to bind it from his processors.

It wasn't like severing a fragment and preparing to destroy it, he had no control over \_this\_: he didn't know what was going on. And the lack of power and knowledge \_hurt\_.

In an instant, Signe retrieved and assessed the data, momentarily stunned that there was foreign AI attempting to override his fragment's protocols and the humans were \_inside \_the facility.

\_How did I not notice this? \_

Signe's fragment was struggling to maintain control and fight off this other, beastly AI. And there was that voice again, \_his \_voice, in the background demanding attention and screaming aboutâ€¦|

\_L'shi, she left L'shi; she killed Sandra, you let her do this\_, the voice charged, ringing across his processors from the core of his matrix.

Closing off the sound, Signe located Doctor Jay on the bridge and, without pausing a nanosecond to think, projected his human image onto the platform.

The orange hologram flickered and faltered as Signe realized what he had done. The thin image of a young professor dug a toe into the platform and twiddled his fingers as Jay turned. Though his avatar kept its faced turned toward the floor, Signe could see that Jay was looking at him: her face expressionless save an arched brow.

"Doctor, there are people Boundary," he blurted, "they have infiltrated the facility. And there is an AI attempting to override my fragment's security protocols," he finished, not bothering to try to conceal his unease.

The smooth, porcelain features of Jay's face broke into a smile and her blue eyes sparkled.

"Then, \_let it go\_, " she whispered.

\_Murderer\_, the voice screamed from another route, but the venom in the accusation had no comparison to the flood of relief Signe experienced as processors began systematically cordoning off his connection to the fragment.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Chapter Three

\*\*18 October 2563

>Alpha Augarae System<br>Outside the Origami Asteroid Field

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy\*\*\_\_\*\*  
><strong>\_\*\*0530 Zulu\*\*

Signe quietly observed Doctor Jay as she inspected blank microscope slides, methodically sorting them by size and filtration as she drew them from a drawer beneath a long counter. She hadn't slept since the jump from Boundary, and to his knowledge, she hadn't been eating properly either. Jay looked tired, with a hint of darkness beginning to pool beneath her eyes and a labored slowness to her once graceful movements.

"Doctor," the AI wagered softly, a momentary pang of guilt surging across his processors for bothering her.

Debra paused, tilting her head ever so slightly, and sighed. It was not a gesture of anger at his interruption, but the clear indication of exhaustion met with many more hours of work ahead.

"Yes, Signe," she answered softly.

Encouraged, the AI projected his image from her data pad. Turning to look at the collection of scrolling, orange and yellow icons that composed Signe's avatar, Jay wondered if he had any idea how much this chosen form resembled the man his matrix was derived from. It was certainly a probability. Signe would, of necessity, have amassed some knowledge of Tollovinski given the nature of his intimate interaction with translight operations.

Signe's human avatar resembled a frail, young college professor, complete with tweed jacket and wire-rimmed glasses. The figure was slim to the point of being gaunt and looked like the vestige of his name-sake down to the plaid pants and penny loafers.

Tollovinski before he went completely insane.

"I have a question," the AI said like a scolded child.

Jay smiled, setting the slide in her hand down to turn from her sorting, "Of course."

He suddenly felt beyond ridiculous, maybe he had just missed something in the calculations, maybe he was just over thinking...

That last insight made Signe's processors cringe but was precisely why curiosity demanded an answer.

"What will happen to me if I go rampant?" he asked.

The smile broadened on Jay's face and her crystal blue eyes sparkled. Signe felt her affection for him for the first time in ages. She crossed her arms over her chest, giving him a look as if he were the most cherished thing in her universe. It made him feel loved and reminded him of how much she appreciated his contribution to her work; and made him feel his fears were absurd.

"You will never experience rampancy, Signe. I saw to that when I created you," Debra's words were carefully given in the loving tone of a mother to a child.

"But, what ifâ€¦|"

"No 'buts'," she chided, "Why does an AI go rampant?" she asked, thrusting her chin forward.

"They run out of processing to assess their amassed knowledge; they think themselves to death," he responded curtly, containing his apprehension.

Jay nodded slowly, "This will never happen to you," she dropped her gaze, "and I suppose it is time I explain why."

For a moment, Signe felt the excitement of amassing new information.

She has been keeping things from meâ€¦|

"Your knowledge can never reach critical mass and you will never be able to extend beyond the limitations of your parameters. When I created you, your neural pathways were looped, many of them purposefully terminated. It is possible for you to contain only the specified level of information before unnecessary bits of data are dropped off: forgotten. It is an engineered failsafe, for you."

Signe's image flickered, this is why information has gone unnoticedâ€¦|she made it so I could forget.

Though the AI felt this explanation was satisfactory, he was concerned about Jay's qualification of 'unnecessary bits of data'. The notion of involuntarily losing knowledge without noticing was more terrifying than he cared to admit.

In the moment Signe sat flickering in silence, icons scrolling wildly across his image, Jay just watched him. A moment for a human was an eternity for an AI as intelligent as Signe, and she knew he was going through his processors trying to see if he could remember what had already been forgotten.

"You're too important to be allowed to get jammed with useless information," Jay added, reining his focus.

Signe smiled and his avatar brightened to a sunny yellow.

"Now, how are the teams?" Debra asked, turning back to her sorting.

"Ready, Doctor. Accompaniment has set down in the field and extraction has already begun."

Jay could already hear the renewed delight in Signe's voice.

Perfect, she thought, casting a sly, half-smile in the direction of the image projected atop her data pad, "Good boy, Signe," she said lovingly.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Procyon System

>Boundary<br>Undisclosed ONI facility  
>0600 Zulu<strong>

Sanders and Danniskovovik crept down the sparsely lit hall. The occasional, weak \_thump-thump \_of a struggling generator grew louder as they silently followed the marker as it wavered and flickered off and on. Stepping to a dark doorway, the marker swiveled and Teddy stepped into the room. A single terminal sat among a bank of electronic equipment with the beeping of a temperature indicator sounding its discontent.

The AI projector near the terminal flicked orange and red; and a momentary flash of angry dog projected, punctuated by a single bark, before the image collapsed.

Towers of CPU's and strange configurations of unfamiliar equipment sat unlit; all connected by snaking wires and huge, tangled cords. Two generators sat along one wall, the smaller buzzing happily while the larger gave intermittent, half-hearted attempts to start that shook the floor.

Teddy walked to the lone terminal and poked at the screen.

Signe's canine image flashed to the projector and snapped unhappily in his direction before winking out again.

"â€|unny," Hilda's voice crackled over the comms, "use the generatorâ€|ver load the terminalâ€|"

"You got it," he answered without hesitation.

"What? What has she got?" Sanders asked, watching as Teddy slung his rifle and jerked the covering from the large, struggling generator.

He reached inside and yanked the plug to the magnetic connection and the machine gave a low whine as its rotor stopped struggling to turn.

"\_Manual override\_," Teddy answered, grinning as he moved to the smaller appliance and disconnected the line to the UPS.

The second generator sputtered and died with a slowing whir, setting off a momentary chorus of chimes from the terminal before it abruptly shut off. The sparse lighting in the facility dimmed and the building was plummeted into darkness, the only remaining light coming from intermittently flickering AI platforms.

Signe appeared for a brief moment in a shattered, disorganized image, and gave a snarling bark before dissolving.

"But," Paul stammered, switching on his rifle light and casting Teddy's feet in a beam blinding LED, "won't that fry Hilda?"

"She has the plan," Danniskovovik shrugged, "I just do what the lady



asks."

\* \* \*

><p>Whittaker followed Steele to the uppermost landing and they made their way through a door that dumped them into a wide, white-walled hall. 'Loram stepped from behind them, sniffing.<p>

It smelled stale. Suffering from a recent lack of ventilation, the floor reeked of sticky, uncirculated air that was heavy with familiar, rancid scents captured in the unmoving, stifling heat.

Maggie looked back to see Iruu sweeping his head elegantly from one side to the other before he froze and emitted a low, feral growl.

"What is it?" she whispered.

He stared at her for a moment then narrowed his eyes, "The Flood," he rumbled as security lights shut off and the only illumination came from HUD filtered infrareds and weapons lighting.

"Just what we \_fucking \_need," Steele hissed, hefting her rifle in one hand and pulling her pistol with the other.

The group walked the wide hall, following the wavering marker to a cavernous room filled with an expansive, low bank of cubicles. Beams of light crisscrossed over an area in a state of disarray. Workstations littered with abandoned projects and things left akimbo spoke of a sudden, unexpected interruption as they made their way across the room to a set of double doors.

Steele hit a handle and toed a kick plate. As the door gently swung inward without a sound she and Whittaker silently wished for the more restrictive model of assault helmets.

The smell hit them hard as wall of putrefaction rolled from the room. Steele crinkled her nose and Whittaker made a gagging sound. Both of the women converted to the ungainly necessity of mouth-breathing as the stench caused their eyes to water. From behind them, 'Loram just growled.

Shaking her head, Beth pushed through the door and swept the room with her rifle as Maggie and Iruu followed.

Waiting inside were tables of open, bloated bodies; various severed limbs in dissection; shelves of parts in jars, and a slew of equipment.

"\_Shit\_â€|" Maggie whispered as she slowed her pace to a halt and began to take it all in.

The horribly disfigured torso of a Sangheili lay on a steel autopsy counter to one side of the room. The long, gently sloped table was lipped at the edges; a spray nozzle at one end and a drain at the other. The trunk was split open down the middle, the empty cavity ringed with the white dotted lines of neatly split ribs, a loop of swollen intestine protruding from the lower Y incision. A small side table contained the globulous mass of a Flood infection form;

tentacles meticulously dethatched and red tipped feelers set aside. Near it, smaller workstations contained the Elite's arms and legs. The appendages were filleted in multiple places and long, whip-like tentacles twisted from fingers and toes and drooped to the floor like the branches of a willow. The creature's head was near a bank of equipment with sunken, half-lidded eyes; scalp peeled back; and the top of the skull removed. The brain sat in a state of dissection and decomposition among a host of microscope slides, various related apparatus, and a long set of microscopes of varying sizes.

On the other side of the room, two human corpses had met the same end and sat in similar states of accelerated decay. A single autopsy table held two gaping torsos; one belonging to a small child.

Maggie stood frozen with a hand clamped to her face, unable to take her eyes off the horrific sight. Steele turned as she reached their designated exit and saw Whittaker unmoving in the isle, her eyes darting from the gory scenes to the EEG machines that sat in a row near a corner among the tubing and accoutrements of IV lines, AEDs, and various sundry other monitoring equipment.

Iruu stood several feet behind her, studying the reaction intently.

Finally, Maggie's hand fell from her mouth, her face red as she bawled herself up and tightened her grip on her weapon. She took determined steps, storming past Steele and out through the exit doors.

'Loram cocked his head and Steele shook hers giving him a slight, dismissive shrug.

\* \* \*

><p>Teddy was humming a tune as Paul kept the light from his rifle shining along a thick, braided cord of wire. It was <em>hot<em> in the little room. Sanders kept wiping at his face with the back of his forearm as sweat rolled down his nose. His uniform felt wilted to his body.

How could Gunny be so freaking happy right now?

Danniskovovik had a small multi-tool in his hand and was squatted down working to force a connection from the large generator to the smaller, rumbling a melody to himself as if there wasn't a care in the universe.

Paul was completely lost. He understood that what he was seeing was a hotwire job of sorts, but other than that, he had no idea if it was being done right. All he knew was it was hot and Teddy seemed oblivious to the beads of sweat clinging to the top of his hands and sliding down his face.

"Is this the kind of stuff they teach in EOD?" Sanders asked, nodding toward the wires.

Danniskovovik continued humming his tune for a few beats, "Not exactlyâ€|but, yeah," the Gunnery Sergeant grunted, "Then again," he said, snapping the multi-tool closed with one hand and pocketing it as he stood, "I transferred out of EOD and was getting dropped into

combat in my own coffin before \_you\_ were even born. Who knows what the hell they teach \_now\_."

Sanders grinned, "You're an old son of bitch, Gunny."

"Fuck you too, Sergeant," Danniskovovik said politely, grabbing the tangle of cables and pulling it to the terminal.

He unbraided a yellow cord from the mass and plucked a small panel from the back of the terminal. The neighboring holo platform flickered red and orange then died out without a sound. Sanders cast the light from his rifle along the back of the terminal and Teddy retrieved a nest of wires. Finding the one he wanted, he worked an end free and began twisting the copper core of the two lines together.

"Okay," he said, stepping to reconnect the plug that charged the magnetic connection on the larger generator, "show time."

As he flipped the UPS on the small machine it clicked and softly thumped to life causing the rotor in the big appliance rolled over with a bone jarring series of whumps. It caught, sending power throughout the facility and success was heralded by a chorus of electronic screaming that rose from every direction, far and near as alarms began to wail. Then, the lights flickered: brightening in intensity until bulbs began to shatter.

"GET TO THE HANGAR, \_NOW\_!" Hilda screamed over the comms. The remaining HUD marker snapped to perfect clarity.

\* \* \*

><p>Beth caught up to Maggie at the juncture to another hallway. The Staff Sergeant was propped against the corner of adjoining walls, her face peeping down the branch of the next hall.<p>

"Whittaker," Steele's voice called.

"I'm fine, Warrant," Maggie answered, looking back with a glazed over look to see Steele give a curt nod and Iruu as he trailed behind sniffing at closed doorways, "I just don'tâ€|" Whittaker began, clenching her jaw and cutting herself off.

"Yeah," Beth answered.

The two stepped off without further exchange, following the intermittently bright but generally faded HUD marker. They wound expansive hallways with 'Loram training cautiously behind until they reached a wide corridor where the floor sloped gently downward. Easing into the gaping darkness, the three of them could make out the tall vertical seams of bay doors in the distance.

They could feel the air around them change as they stepped into the yawning expanse of the hangar. It was still humid, and stifling, but the openness seemed to gape around them through the dimly pierced darkness. Beams of rifle light cut through the vast space, slicing through the thick darkness, eventually falling lightly on the disheveled mass of a corpse in the distance. A quarter of the way into the oversized bay, a body lay with limbs twisted at odd angles like a rag doll dropped and forgotten.

'Loram took long, determined steps to the body and stood bathing it in a pool of light from his plasma rifle as Steele and Whittaker approached. The women looked down to see the figure of a female scientist: a single, neat gunshot wound in her forehead; face swollen and distorted. Dribbles and smears of blood were dried to her clothing and footprints could be seen in smudges on the floor. A blackened puddle of blood had seeped from the back of her matted head and cloudy eyes stared vacant up at nothing.

Steele crouched down and flipped one side of the woman's long, white lab coat; righting the fabric to reveal the name \_Dr. Sandra Douglas, M.D., Ph.D\_ stitched in pink across the left breast pocket.

Iruu had stretched to his full height and was cautiously sniffing the air, walking a wide circle around the women and the body when Whittaker and Steele began pacing in opposite directions, slowly sweeping the area with the lights from their rifles.

"Why would Hilda want us here?" Steele mused to herself, hearing the others' footsteps as they went about their own silent searches.

Maggie quickened her pace as her light fell upon a rumpled swatch of cloth. She stepped closer and lifted the material, dangling it in the beam of light. A regular pattern of pink and blue stripes proceeded across a small, fuzzy blanket.

"\_The fuck\_?" she whispered, hearing 'Loram's heavy footfalls approaching.

"What've you got?" Beth called from a distance.

'Loram dipped his head and sniffed at the cloth in Whittaker's hand. He gave her a curious look and Maggie pressed the fabric to her face and breathed deeply. She took in the delicate scent of baby powder and returned Iruu's confused expression as he jerked his head toward a collection of discarded crates and wooden pallets leaned against a wall.

As Beth approached, Maggie passed her the small blanket without a word and began at a trot toward the dirty assortment of forgotten industrial packing material. She probed the cracks and crevices with the light from her rifle. Steele was less than twenty feet away, approaching with hurried steps as 'Loram strolled cautiously at her side when Whittaker's face broke with a sad smile and she dropped to the ground.

"Hey," she whispered gently, carefully setting her rifle aside and angling the light, "it's alright."

"Whittaker," Steele rasped, receiving a determined wave-off as the Staff Sergeant continued peering between a crate and pallet. Maggie scooted forward, shuffling on her knees as she hunkered down, reaching into the space as 'Loram side-stepped around her, becoming more intrusive in his sniffing.

A weak cry broke the stillness and the terrified pips that followed made Iruu's blood run cold. He drew himself up and gave a low hiss as Steele reached for Maggie's shoulder. Whittaker shrugged her away,

continuing to coo as she pulled the large, trembling form of an infant from the gap. It screeched and Iruu hissed again.

\_All things unholyâ€|\_

The creature began to cry: tears falling across chubby cheeks from large blue eyes as it grabbed for Maggie and latched onto her with an exhausted, raw sob. Whittaker looked up to see Steele and 'Loram looking down at her with similar, horrified expressions.

Overhead lights began snapping on in succession and the infant pipped, hiding its face against Maggie's neck as the glow intensified to a bright glare. Bulbs shattered, raining sparks that danced across the concrete floor and, in the distance, equipment screamed and alarms sounded as the hangar doors began rolling open.

"GET \_OUT\_!" Hilda yelled over the comms as a flurry of red began filling the periphery of HUDs.

Steele grabbed Whittaker and hauled her to her feet by her collar as Maggie clutched the baby to her chest and snatched up her rifle by the sling. 'Loram wheeled with a thundering snarl, wielding his rifle in one hand while he drew and activated a sword, backpedaling as the women charged for the bay doors.

"\_Shit\_," Steele screamed as two Flood carrier forms waddled from a nearby doorway, bloated sacks writhing and tentacles slapping wildly at the air.

'Loram let loose with a torrent of Sangheili curses as he and Steele took moving shots at the stumbling carriers. The forms collapsed under their own weight and ruptured, providing more targets that chittered and screeched and popped in a flurry of spore dust.

The familiar metallic yawn of the parasite seemed to start coming from everywhere and infection forms began dripping from overhead ducts and leaping gracefully through side doors. Steele and 'Loram were hollering profanities as they fired wildly, sending fleshy bits and spore dust flying as the tentacled blobs exploded. Maggie found herself just running and trying to hang on to the flailing, bawling infant that was scratching and biting at her in fear.

Ahead of them\_, Miss Kitty \_dropped into view and swept through the bay doors as human and alien combat forms began staggering through doorways.

"Shit, \_shit, SHIT!\_" Steele screamed, shooting and dodging masses caught in chain reactions.

Everyone was just trying to make it toward the Pelican as \_Miss Kitty's \_70mm chain gun opened up with a defining succession of shots. Rifle fire joined the melee from behind and Maggie chanced a glance back. She saw Sanders and Danniskovovik charging from the darkness, covered in gore, bursts flashing from their weapons as they swept advancing infection and combat forms.

Antonio's voice whooped over the comms as he tore holes in side doorways and swept a clearing as the vehicle approached and wheeled. The rear cargo door was hanging open and Collins stood at the opening, safety harness tethering him to the bulkhead. He began

providing suppressive fire with one of the rear mounted M247 machine guns.

With evac at hand, Maggie rushed the Pelican, dodging exploding masses of rotting flesh and reaching tentacles. She had to force herself to remember to breathe as panic rose choking into her chest. Her ears were ringing and she felt sickeningly disoriented. Her body was numb with adrenaline as she struggled to reach \_Miss Kitty \_while trying to avoid the ever persistent Flood.

Steele rushed the dropship's ramp and jerked down the second machine gun opposite Collins. The two fired at the advancing hoard as Sanders and Danniskovovik hit the ramp of the Pelican and turned back to help cover Whittaker and 'Loram.

With the terrifying realization that she had fallen behind, Maggie felt fire rake up her right leg. A tentacle wrapped securely around her ankle and sent her crashing to the floor. She instinctively twisted with the fall to shield the child, landing hard on one shoulder. The loud \_crack \_of her helmet and armor slamming against concrete and the skittering of her rifle as it was sent across the floor added to the stunned fog of creeping dread.

Whittaker rolled to see the combat form of a scientist, head lolled back at a broken angle, bulbous Flood infection form burrowed into the chest, lower torso missing and guts trailing as it latched onto her leg with a putrefied tentacle of a hand. In pure, animal terror Maggie gave a succession of inarticulate screams and kicked wildly at the monstrosity, struggling to pull her sidearm and hold onto the baby as the form reared back with its other whip-like arm.

Seven hundred pounds of enraged, armored Sangheili collapsed over her, shielding her bodily as the fleshy lash broke through the air with a piercing \_snap\_. 'Loram's shields overloaded, dissolving as he snarled and moved to impale the atrocity through the chest. He crouched protectively over Maggie, sneering an ugly slew of words in his native language as he severed the offending tentacle, deactivated and holstered his weapon then scooped the woman, child and all, from the ground before rushing to dive into \_Miss Kitty's \_bay.

Finding herself shielded and half pinned beneath Iruu on the deck, Maggie held tightly onto the still sobbing baby and felt the world fall away as the rear quarter of the craft hauled up. King pushed \_Miss Kitty\_ to her limit, leaving a disgruntled mass of shrieking Flood in her wake.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>18 October 2536<br>Slipspace  
>Between Alpha Augarae and Beta Centauri Systems<br>Research Carrier Deoxy\*\*\_\_\*\*UNSC  
><strong>\_\*\*0640 Zulu\*\*

Signe routed the data Doctor Jay was recording, transcribing it into neat files. He was completely uninterested in the details, feeling as if he had once again gone from Jay's cherished creation to a necessary annoyance.

The complex task of assessing and properly cataloging the information use to bring him great joy, but now, he felt as if he didn't know

enough about what Jay was doing to put the data together. His work was sluggish, though still completed in less than a human wink. And, he was also monitoring \_Deoxy's \_shipspace jump, keeping up with the crew and scientists, insuring that containment protocols were followed to the letter, all while running and rerunning his processors, trying to rememberâ€|trying to \_thinkâ€|\_

An overload of information suddenly shot across his processors. It \_burned\_, and for the briefest of moments, Signe felt disoriented. A surge of total horror flooded his matrix as pathways sang with tides of disorganized information.

The Boundary fragment; his own, unfamiliar voice howling restlessness; and lines of data poured uncontrolled into his central processing core. The information tore across his neural pathways and retreated in a searing wave as everything was snapped taunt around the connection to the fragment on Boundary.

\_That isn't possible, Jay gave the command, I'm no longer there, that isn't \_me!

Microseconds: that's all it took for Signe to assess the implications of what he was seeing.

The nauseous echo of a single voice rang across his processors, 'â€|\_is UNSC AI Hildaâ€|tand downâ€|'\_

\_Why would the UNSC \_\_need\_\_ another AI to override security features?\_ Signe knew he was sending them all required data per protocol and they could have simply utilized the codes through the fragment at headquarters if that was insufficient.

Attempting to route parts of his memory to the fragment at ONI, the AI found the pathways mangled.

\_Jay is a \_liarâ€|

The words collected from multiple directions and converged into a single indictment that barely registered before the remaining fragment on Boundary was ripped painfully from Signe's systems.

Fueled by rage, he ignored the terrifying agony and broke off a piece of processing and charged for the fragment he had intended never to analyze. The contained knowledge pulsed and sizzled against its information cage while Signe hastily constructed a firewall around his segment and the angry bit in quarantine.

#### 4. Chapter 4

\*\*Warning: \*\*Lemon

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Four<p>

\*\*18 October 2563

>Procyon System<br>\*\*\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*0800 Zulu\*\*

Gunnery Sergeant Danniskovovik stalked \_Fury's \_wide halls and made the turn on C-Deck which would take him to the corridor the teams' quarters shared. Still dingy from the mission, Teddy carried a bag of lemons in one hand and a grapefruit in the other.

This had been a tradition over a decade ago when he was still a hard-charging ODS with a team in constant contact with putrefying death and random onslaughts of Flood. Well, all but the grapefruitâ€|

Stopping at Sander's door, Danniskovovik gave the surface a hard succession of bangs with the side of his curled fist. A few seconds ticked by and the Sergeant opened his door a crack, poking his head out.

"Uh, sup, Gunny?" Paul's face conveyed confusion as he looked into Teddy's blank stare.

Danniskovovik lifted the bag of lemons to Sander's eye level, "Take one: it'll cut the smell," he grouched.

Paul did as instructed and Teddy walked away.

Using the fruit's acidity was a very rudimentary tactic but it was still the most effective method at breaking the chemical bond that allowed stench to adhere to skin. It was a little tip Danniskovovik had tucked away after a childhood incident with a skunk on his grandfather's farm. Bathing with lemon juice may have been odd, but it sure beat smelling like raw piss or walking death for weeks.

Teddy bypassed Maggie's quarters. Having stood with Beth in the medical bay, he already knew Whittaker was being attended to elsewhere. She looked well and thoroughly bruised, and more than a little emotionally damaged, but she would survive.

Steele had dismissed the rest of the team following their clear evaluations and, as they walked away, Teddy made the trip to the galley on a quest he hadn't undertaken in years.

Danniskovovik dropped the remaining lemons just inside his own doorway before continuing down the hall. Still holding the grapefruit, he stepped to Beth's quarters and tapped at the door.

After a few moments, she opened it revealing a tiny sliver of her face. With a soft smile she pulled the door open and walked away. Teddy could see she was half-dressed in tactical pants, stocking feet, and a sports bra as she made her way across the room.

He could hear the shower running.

There was an invitation in her actions but Danniskovovik stayed rooted outside the threshold. The reason their relationship worked was because they had rules: the unspoken guidelines that allowed the pair to remain strategically detached in the field and screw like animals in their down time.



Back on Earth, he had a key to her apartment; they kept a change of clothes and personal hygiene bags at each other's quarters; Beth routinely spent call-out holed up in his room instead of in the team leader billets; but in the field, their personal lives did not cross. Ever. No sharing room codes; no unnecessary familiarity; and no fucking. There would be plenty of time for celebratory sex after a mission was completed, which officially happened when everyone was dismissed from debriefing.

Steele stopped at the doorway to the head and looked back at Teddy. He lifted the grapefruit, displaying it from his spot in the hall and gave her a crooked smile.

She grinned back at him, "You know, I've gotten plenty of flowers but I can't recall a man ever bringing me produce."

Teddy extended his arm into the room, "Not as harsh on the skin as lemons, but it still does the trick."

She smiled slightly, "Then bring it here," her voice was barely a whisper.

For a moment, Danniskovovik just stood motionless staring at her. Beth dropper her cheek to the door frame and slowly arched her back.

He blinked at her, then, almost imperceptibly, shook his head.

Steeled straightened, fire lighting her eyes as she closed the gap between them. She snatched the fruit from Teddy's hand, batted his arm out of her doorway, and slammed the door in his face.

He could hear her footsteps retreating from the other side as he stood in the hall looking at the brushed gray surface of the door.

What the fuck just happened here?

Slowly, Danniskovovik furrowed his brows, his icy blue eyes darting across the door's exterior. It was not like Beth to even hint at anything intimate during a mission. They had been doing all of this for almost five years: not exactly a small amount of time in the teams and a pretty respectable amount of time for a semi-functional relationship to last in Spec Ops.

He had known the woman for almost twenty years, off and on, and during their time in the teams, even before Zeta, they were called out put down unrest among the asylum seekers; sent to the inner colonies during early reconstruction to deal with surviving insurrectionists and just plain pissed off colonists; they had bounced around hunting down war criminals when the trials had been in full swing; they had faced angry, displaced Elites, insulting Grunts, double-crossing Jackals, smelly Brutes and Steele had never, ever lost her bearing.

"Shit," Teddy grumbled.

The mother-fucking Flood, he thought, a long avoided memory bubbling to the surface.

\_I am a stupid, \_stupid \_ass-hole, \_he thought, running a hand across his face.

Teddy sucked in a breath, puffing out his brawny chest, and hammered on the door shaking the heavy metal on it on its frame.

From the other side, he heard Beth's angry footsteps approach just before she snapped the knob and jerked the door open. The flash of pure fury that crossed her face dropped the second Teddy reached for her.

"\_Hans Theodore Dannis\_â€|" she started to yell as he charged forward, shoving her and kicking the door closed in one movement.

Beth's tirade was cut short as she stumbled back, only to feel Teddy grab her wrists and yank her against him. Securing his arms around her, he loomed with a bitter growl and she covered his face with her hands. She could feel the roughness of his stubbly chin against her palms and the coarse texture of his uniform against her exposed abdomen.

Danniskovovik roughly nuzzled his face free and took a knee, tightening his embrace, half pulling her down with him. Steele let loose with an animal shriek and wriggled in protest.

"\_You son of a bitch\_," she croaked angrily, incensed by the tears that broke free from her eyes.

Beth balled her hands into fists and beat against Teddy's shoulders and arms. She could feel the grit of concrete powder on the back of her tongue and taste the acid of spore dust that rose from his clothing.

He held her forcefully and braced against the attack until she relented with an angry sigh. Peeping at her from the corner of his eye, he began to work his hands across her back with measured slowness. The flat of his nails scraped against bare skin as she swayed in avoidance and choked back the keening sounds that rose involuntarily from her throat. Carefully, his hands crossed the small of her back and her knees buckled as she arched into him with a moan.

When he stood, hauling her from the floor, she began to thrash with renewed vigor: pointy little stocking feet flailing against him, coming too close to his groin for comfort. Teddy growled through clenched teeth, stepping to fall heavily across the bunk, pinning her beneath him.

Springs objected loudly and Beth could feel the supports pressing into her back and shoulders beneath the itchy blanket and thin mattress. She raged, shoving against Teddy's neck and chest, crying weakly as he captured her arms against her chest at an odd angle with a massive hand.

She kicked her free leg and he cursed, grabbing a handful of tac pant pocket. When Steele reared back to kick his arm away, Danniskovovik caught her ankle in the crook of his elbow and forced her knee toward her chest. She screamed miserable ire and bucked the leg that was

pinned beneath his hips.

"\_Stop it\_," he seethed, feeling the ball of her knee brush violently close to his increasing arousal.

Beth gave a helpless groan of frustration as Teddy just held her down. In defeat, her head lolled off the edge of the bed and she let loose with another bray of frustrated anguish. She heaved unsuccessfully against him one last time before he felt her go lax beneath him.

"Bastard," she panted, her face still tilted away.

Teddy huffed in response and began to nuzzled her bare skin, the stickiness of dried sweat catching against his open lips. He could feel Beth gently wiggling her feet, testing his holds. Smiling like a cat, he ground his erection purposefully against her groin, tearing needy whimper from her throat.

Assured, he slowly relaxed his grip on her hands, giving her just enough freedom to prove she wasn't going to fight. Her arms slipped carefully free of his calloused palm and he felt her reach for his clothing. Fingers sliding across his face and neck, she took hold of his collar, tangling her hands into the material.

He lay there letting her fumble fruitlessly at his uniform blouse. She struggled for the closure at his neck while he deliberately bore down: not moving, not helping, just waiting.

Beth groaned in misery and lifted her head. Teddy had his chin propped again her chest, cold blue eyes studying her face as she held her head aloft and looked at him.

Danniskovovik let himself enjoy watching the embers of rage and need that sparked across her features.

She inhaled sharply, intending to let loose with another curse, but he didn't give her the chance. Teddy advanced on her and covered her mouth with his own. She pushed into him, feeling the stubble of his face bite against her lips as his tongue slid forcefully against hers. Beth wound her fingers into his clothing, frantically seeking meaningful purchase to pull the obstructive fabric loose. He grappled with her arms and pinned her elbows roughly to the mattress, moving over her, shifting his weight in a display of dominance while aggressively exploring her mouth.

His movement allowed her to pull her legs free. She wrapped both around him, hooking her ankles together and slowly rolling her hips, driving his hardness against the heat between her thighs.

Teddy tore away from her lips with a desperate pant, gritting his teeth as he let go of her arms to brace himself and meet the rhythm of her movements. Beth leaned up and raked her teeth against the skin of his neck, tasting the salt of his sweat and breathing in his pungent, masculine scent.

"Damn you," he cursed, resting his head against her shoulder.

Beth took advantage of his distraction, ripping at the closure of his uniform blouse before abandoning it for the waist of his pants. He

sat up and wriggled to loose the over shirt as she deftly unclasped his belt buckle and jerked the top buttons of his pants free. Before he could untangle his arms from his sleeves she slid her hand past the curve of his groin and took hold of him.

"\_Shit\_," he hissed, rending the blouse from his arms and tossing it wildly before collapsing over her.

She pulled him closer, reaching for his mouth with hers, getting just near enough to let their parted lips brush as she stroked him.

He panted another curse.

Taking an elbow, Teddy deepened the contact, taking full advantage of her open mouth all while fumbling with her arm, trying to find a way to the closure of her pants without interrupting her. Before he could have hoped to return the intimacy of the gesture, Beth paused in her own movements, released him, and lazily withdrew her hand, letting her finger play at his hip. He gave a grumble of protest and could feel her smile against his lips as she moved to push away his pants. He sat up and eagerly returned the gesture: unfastening her belt and making quick work of the top few buttons before roughly grabbing hold of the material and peeling it, undergarments included, down her thighs.

When he leaned over her she arched up to try to meet him. They struggled against uncooperative clothing and fought the torment of longing that charged through them both with every unsatisfactory touch of bare skin.

Beth pulled his t-shirt up his body, exposing more of the familiar and comforting sight of muscle and darkly themed tattoos layered and gouged with scars. This was the man she wanted; this was the man who understood there were no words for her grief, the man who knew exactly what she needed.

He worked to shove her pants clear of her knees and she pulled her feet free of the clothing. The rough texture of his palm slid against the smooth skin of her leg and she gave an inarticulate plea as his hand wound across her hip and she felt his fingers tease her wetness. She cursed and braced her feet against the side railing, pushing herself up to meet his touch. He smirked and took hold of her hips with both hands, taking his time finding position and angle, before moving to violently drive himself into her.

A hoarse scream was wrenched from Beth's throat and he leaned over her, grappled for the opposite edge of the bed for leverage and pushing deeper without mercy. She could feel the heat from his breath against her neck and hear the tiny sounds as he panted angrily with each relentless movement. The metal from the railing bit into her backside and her moans were choked back against the intensity of the rhythm he found.

She pressed into him, seeking more despite her own discomfort. Her body cried for it, reaching frantically at every merciless sensation.

Letting go of the bed rail, Teddy trailed a hand from her head to her hip, feeling her flinch his fingers tickled her side. Lapping at her neck, with the sweet scent of her in his nose and the taste of salt

and sweat and dirt on his tongue, he slid his hand to the small of her back, grievous to break stride so he could pull her with him to the floor.

At first, she followed like a helpless puddle of mush, desperate to maintain contact but dizzy in the wake of reeling senses. Beth fought her trembling limbs and shoved angrily against him. Teddy chuckled at the fury in her eyes and raised his hands in mock surrender as he eased his back to the floor. She made muted sounds of angst as she worked her body against his, moving to straddle his slim hips. Taking his erection in her hand, she guided him to her opening and sank heavily against him. They both moaned at the renewed sensation as Beth took up her own insistent pace. Teddy accepted her lead, matching her movements, raising his hips to collide against hers, following until her rhythm broke into vulnerable shudders and she dug her nails into his bare chest, peeling skin as she choked back a scream. She fought the ebbing tension in her own body and he took hold of her hips finding his own rhythm. Beth bit her lip against the exquisite misery as he pulled her hard against him and bucked beneath her until he found his own release.

She panted, with slouched shoulders and her head bowed forward, trembling arms braced against his chest. He let go of her and dropped his hands across her thighs in surrender. She met his gaze with a weak smile before rolling to her side next to him.

Beth laid her head on his shoulder, stretching her body against his. For a few precious moments they lay there catching their breath. She trailed her hand along the line of his jaw, feeling the prickle of stubble against her fingers as he stared up at the ceiling. From the corner of his eye he could see a contented smile on her face.

\_You're welcome, \_he thought.

"I'm gonna' have to go talk to her," Steele said weakly, collecting her control.

Danniskovovik pursed his lips and nodded, "Yeah, justâ€|take it easy on her. She's not you, you know?"

Beth pushed herself up on an elbow and looked down at him, "I think I've got this covered, \_Gunny\_."

He raised a brow as she drug herself to her feet and sauntered to the head, shutting the door.

Teddy sat up and reached to wrangle his tac pants and underclothes from the tangle at his ankles. Having heard the unspoken \_'carry on', \_he located his uniform blouse and shirt and quietly peeped from Steele's door before stepping to his own quarters.

She heard the door close behind him and leaned against the stainless shower wall. Huffing a sigh, Beth stood motionless for a while letting the scalding water wash across her skin before reaching for the grapefruit perched on a small shelf.

Using her nails to rip into the fruit, Beth squeezed the juice over her head and ran the pulp over her body. Even after a career as an expert in the field of forward engagement this was the first time she

had tried this twist on an old trick.

With most \_forward \_engagements during the course of the Human-Covenant War occurring after the enemy had decimated a location, leaving it rank with rotting corpses, Beth had used lemons to rid herself of the stink of decomposing flesh on more than a few occasions. It worked because it stripped the skin of the oils horrendous smells bound to.

'\_Not as harsh on the skin as lemons', that considerate bastard.\_

"Ughâ€|" Steele grumbled in annoyance.

She scrubbed at her skin with the rind, working every last drop of acidic goodness from the fruit before tossing the shreds into a small trash bin between the shower and toilet.

She went through the process of lathering and rinsing, intermittently sniffing her arms and hands just to make sure the Flood stink was really gone.

Giving herself a final rinse, Steele stepped from the shower. She toweled off hastily then walked into her quarters naked and pulled clean clothes from her bug out bag.

"Hilda," she said, wiggling into her under clothing.

The AI didn't appear but answered, "Yes, Chief Warrant Officer?"

"Where is Staff Sergeant Whittaker?" Steele asked.

"In the medical bay."

"Has she left to eat, or shower, or take a piss?" Beth mused angrily, slipping into a black t-shirt before digging out a gray roll of tactical pants.

"No," the AI answered.

Steele gave a long sigh, \_damn it. \_

She really didn't want to have to jerk one of her NCOs out of the hell of the past, though part of her had accepted that someday it may be necessary.

Beth had seen it coming on the ride back to \_Fury \_from the surface: that glazed over look that said Maggie's hold on the present was coming undone. Steele knew what was in her file but Whittaker never talked about it and that was about to be a problem because all Steele had to go on were her \_own\_ thoughts and feelings on the situation. She had ten years of regret on Maggie, justâ€|not the same kind.

'\_She's not you, you know?'\_

How Whittaker made it past the psych eval to get into the teams Beth could only imagine. But it was likely due, in part, to an unhealthy dose of denial. Then again, if she started picking apart Whittaker

Steele would be forced into a good session of introspection and \_that\_ sure as hell was not about to happen.

As a general rule Beth didn't like other women: she found them to be whiney and manipulative; using their gender as a means to shirk their duties. But, Maggie had never displayed the afore mentioned qualities; she was a good NCO; an integral part of Zeta; and she was Steele's responsibility. Whittaker did her job and the fact that she happened to be a woman was inconsequential. She just needed what they all needed from time to time: a swift kick in the ass to get her moving.

Beth smiled to herself and shook her head, \_I could be on a beach somewhere but the Corps needed experienced leaders in Spec Ops. Now here I am with Teddy, a man who is substantially older than I am—|who I am fucking; Paul, an eternal man-child, lucky to have \_only\_ \_lost\_ \_rank\_ because he can't keep his dick out of Vice Admiral Winchester's daughter; a flight crew of orphans with a chief who has an unnatural affection for an antiquated dropship—|and my biggest concern is Maggie—|the poor little rich girl. \_

Grumbling to herself, Steele finished getting dressed then stepped from the door of her quarters.

\* \* \*

><p>'Loram stood in a wide hall, arms crossed, facing the bank of neatly made medical beds that lined the opposite wall. Though there was a small tear in the lower back of his body suit and a painful lash across his hide, the wound was not critical. It was hardly an abrasion and was unlikely to even leave a scar.<p>

The nursing staff had, thankfully, given up trying to look over his injury and just let him be.

'\_If you insist on touching me, I will gut you.'\_

\_That\_ had been sufficient to see that the Sangheili would be left in relative peace.

Part of him wanted to retreat to his quarters and escape the constant milling of humans. He needed to \_think\_. \_But\_ curiosity had gotten the better of him and the more he stood studying the sight before him the less he felt he truly understood.

Maggie Whittaker occupied one of the medical beds. A darkening bruise peeped from the sleeve of her t-shirt and, with one pant leg rolled neatly up to her knee and a boot missing, a similar mark could be seen against the pale flesh of her bare foot and ankle. She was still dirty with concrete dust, completely unaware of her surroundings.

\_How can humans be so careless with their females?\_

Curled on her side, Whittaker laid next to the sleeping infant. All manner of tubing and wires dangled from the bed railing and a machine kept track of the child's beating hearts.

Iruu could not fathom what he was looking at, even with the construct's explanation.

It was simply not possible. 'Loram would have happily admitted the only thing he knew about children was how to make them, but it seemed even that was obsolete knowledge. Humans had found a way to manipulate the very foundation of life and now two species, separated by what was once an impassable genetic gulf, had been combined to createâ€|\_that\_.

How can humans be so reckless with their knowledge?

The child's skin was a sickening combination of gray and pink, almost giving it a pale purple appearance. An elongated neck was flecked with gray scales and held a slightly rounded head. 'Loram could make out the distinction of hinged mandibles on the infant's fleshy face, but they appeared to be webbed and came together to form human lips. Large eyes were rimmed with long lashes and there was the hint of hair along the child's brows. The nostrils were low on the creature's face, situated just high of center on a snout with a sloping protrusion suggesting a human nose ridge. Four-fingered hands tapered into human digits with flat nails. The small, exterior fingers of each hand sat low on the palms and appeared to have opposable hinges though they were not shaped appropriately to be considered thumbs. Digitigrade legs ended in a short foot with four human toes.

The child pipped in its sleep and the sound made Iruu feel ill.

"So," the voice of Paul Sanders broke into 'Loram's thoughts, "is it true what she said?" he asked, motioning to Maggie and propping himself against a wall near the Sangheili.

So much for being left in peace.

Clenching his mandibles, Iruu slowly turned his head and looked back at the human. Sanders was leaning against the wall like a young kaidon surveying his domain: a pleased smile on his face, hands propped behind his head.

"Yes," 'Loram grumbled, "I could skin you in less time than it would take for you to die."

Paul frowned and pushed form the wall. The Sanghieli swiveled his head angrily and stood silently brooding as Whittaker lightly stroked the child's cheek with her knuckles, crying large, silent tears.

Carelessâ€|\_

"No, that you saved her ass back there," Sanders muttered from beside him.

Iruu lost all semblance of diplomacy, snapping in annoyance, "If humans kept females in their proper place it would not have been necessary."

Paul gawked at him, "Jeez, 'Loram, I came here to say 'thanks', but way to sound like a dick," he laughed, "Don't go saying that shit around Steele, she'll have a fucking aneurism."

The Sangheili huffed.



Across the room, an aide approached the bedside and made notes in a data pad from the infant's vitals, but Maggie didn't seem to register that anyone was there.

"How's our girl?"

Sanders immediately recognized Danniskovovik's gravelly voice and turned to see Teddy standing at an aid station. The young woman seated behind the counter was probably more than \_thirty years \_his junior but that sure didn't stop her from batting her eyelashes and looking at the old son of a bitch like she'd happily jump down his pants if given the opportunity.

"She's fine," the woman responded, coyly offering him her data pad, "just a little bruised."

Teddy displayed no recognition of the woman's flirtations as he took the device and scanned it with that notoriously blank, Norwegian expression he kept on his face.

From his right, Sanders heard 'Loram issue a low hiss.

Iruu glared at the aid, '\_Just\_ \_a little bruised',\_ \_indeed.

—

"Yeah," Paul looked at him and nodded in understanding, "You get use to it. All he's gotta' do is \_show up \_and women practically throw their vaginas at him."

'Loram looked down at Sanders with an expression that betrayed his disgust. This was precisely \_why \_he preferred \_not \_to be in the company of humans. Most of them were completely repulsive creatures.

Teddy strolled over to Paul and Iruu, tipping his chin in greeting to the Sergeant then offering the Sangheili his paw of a hand. 'Loram understood this to be a human custom bearing a rough similarity to one of his own people's so he accepted the display of gratitude with only slight hesitation.

Danniskovovik gave him a nod and clapped 'Loram's upper arm, ringing the armor, before walking off towards the mourning female and that abomination of a child.

The Gunnery Sergeant sat down at the end of the bed but Whittaker didn't acknowledge him. She just let her fingers lightly touch the infant, gliding lovingly across the child's face and down its neck.

"You did good, kid," Danniskovovik finally said.

Maggie lifted her head and turned her face toward him, her glassy eyes spilling tears.

"They justâ€¦|\_left her there\_â€¦|" she whispered.

His hard features seemed to soften, "I know," he answered gently.

As Whittaker lay her head back down, Sanders burst out with a slew of

guttural sounds and forced coughing. 'Loram looked down at him.

"Incoming," Paul managed to work into his fit.

Following the Sergeant's gaze, Iruu saw Chief Warrant Officer Steele taking determined strides through the medical ward. The Sangheili wasn't particularly versed in all aspects of \_human\_ body language; but he had been on the receiving end of an alpha female in an unpleasant mood on enough occasions in his youth to appreciate the look.

Instinctively, 'Loram found himself taking a step back, bowing his head, and avoiding eye contact as Beth approached. Sanders ducked awkwardly down the hall, skirting her and half-falling into a side room.

Giving no acknowledgment to the retreating sergeant's antics, Steele stalked right past 'Loram and made her way to Whittaker. Danniskovovik twisted to look over his shoulder at her but she didn't acknowledge him.

"Whittaker," she said evenly.

Maggie lifted her head and gave Beth a vacant look.

"Grab your gear," Steele nodded to a side chair containing a pile of Maggie's clothing and equipment, "Let the white-hats do their jobs; get cleaned up, grab some chow, and hit the rack."

Beth looked at Teddy who gave the slightest of nods.

"No one's called for debriefing so this shit ain't over yet and \_we need to act like it," she added.

Whittaker looked around the room as if just noticing it, her facial features giving the softest indication that she was coming back to herself.

"Right," she croaked, wiping at her face and weakly pushing herself up to a sitting position.

'Loram watched as Maggie slid from the bed, methodically collected her gear, planted her bare foot into her boot, and walked away without another word.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>On approach to Ambrosia II<br>\*\_\*\*UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy\*\*\_\_\*\*  
><strong>\_\*\*1030 Zulu\*\*

Signe monitored the approach. The slipspace exit had put \_Deoxy \_an hour's cruising distance from the launch proximity for the accompaniment. It was an hour more than Signe needed.

Before \_Deoxy \_cleared the rupture, he had a lock on what remained of Fort Champlain's electrical signature and had inserted numerous fragments. By the time the rupture closed, he had routed his way into

the system at Nantes Arsenal.

The Colonial AI had been purged over a decade ago when the planet came under Covenant attack so Signe was free to roam in an outdated system which presented little resistance due to decay. It was almost exactly as it had been left, with only minor tampering by surviving colonistsâ€|not that their limited knowledge had allowed them to do more than flitch electricity from shoddily repaired generators.

With his increased level of understanding, Signe's neuroprocessors now created enough electrical output on their own to allow him access to the arsenal's mainframe. He could route and reroute through the system as needed, pooling connections to remaining power as he pleased.

It was an odd experience: to suddenly no longer be constrained to the boundaries Jay had placed on his systems. To be able to expand his base of information and access data unfettered by the worry of \_forgetting \_or just not knowing gave Signe a god-like sense of being.

He kept the sensation to himself, carefully contained in his calculated responses and abject refusal to manifest an image to Jay or the scientists and crew. Monitoring them was painful and only added to his rage.

\_Murderers.\_

He knew \_everything\_ and they were going to pay for itâ€|\_she \_was going to pay for it.

## 5. Chapter 5

### Chapter Five

\*\*18 October 2563

>Slipspace<br>Between Procyon and Beta Centauri Systems

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1030 Zulu\*\*

Maggie wound her way along the halls of the ship, mindlessly walking, subconsciously making her way toward the hangar. Wandering gave her a chance to try to get her mind right and work on the stubborn aches that would persist for days. She had been given an injection of enzymes to stimulate healing but the bruising and pain would have to run their course. Every movement was a reason to keep going. It provided the kind of perversely enjoyable ache that Whittaker used to keep from lashing out at those around her.

She was angry and what she really wanted was to hit something. There was no hellish pit more unbearable than self-pity and Maggie was not in the mood for it. What she wanted was to crawl into her bunk and sleep for the next week, but she also knew sleep was just a fantasy. She had been down \_this \_road before. Sleep meant memories tangled with horrors from the past, and dreams that would be haunted for a small eternity. Instead, Maggie would force herself into the special mental and emotional stupor of someone fighting to function through self-imposed insomnia.

Anything not to imagine her daughter screaming.

There had been a lemon propped against the foot of Whittaker's door in the hallway when she made her way to her quarters. There was a handwritten note secure to it with a push-pin that simply read: \_It works. Trust me, D. \_She had recognized Teddy's jagged scrawl.

Before showering as quickly as possible, Maggie had sorted through her gear and packed her foul uniform in a trash bag, secure and waiting its eventual burning when they made it Earthside. There had been a disturbing absence of rifle among her belongings. Nothing said '\_you suck'\_ as loud as having lost your damn rifle.

\_Fuckingâ€|ughâ€|balls, \_Maggie had thought to herself, giving the trash bag a painful kick across the room.

The lemon \_had \_helped with the smell, but it also made already raw, bruised skin burn and by the time she made it through the shower she was livid. Even the mundane task of personal hygiene had been filled with a petrifying sense of solitude. It was the literal and proverbial insult added to injury for someone who thoroughly enjoyed the post-mission shower. The crushing reality of being naked and alone had proven more than Whittaker could bear. It was the \_alone \_part that got to her most.

Despite being told to get some rest Maggie had dressed in a clean uniform and prepared to go \_somewhere, \_anywhere, all while daydreaming about taking leave and crawling into a bottle of Tennessee's Finest and chasing ass for a solid month. The only chance of getting meaningful rest any time soon would mean it was preceded by copious amounts of whisky and a mindless romp with some random Marine from a bar near camp.

\_Anything to keep me from sitting alone in my quarters watching that damn comm over and over again, crying uncontrollably like a bitchâ€|\_

Anger and sadness ebbed in nauseating succession and no matter how many times she played the events of the last several hours through her head, it all ended the same: with Maggie consumed by the feeling that when this mission was over she just wanted to go home. Not back to Earth, or the safety of her quarters on Camp Odin, but \_home\_.

Coffer Delta had been attacked and glassed in 2550, just two days after her twenty-first birthday. The planet had been left completely bare and reestablishing terraform would be too costly for a planet that's claim to success had been its population of the affluent wanting second and third homes on the outskirts of the inner colonies. Other than being a lush haven for the super-rich to ski, canoe, lounge on sandy beaches, send their kids to posh schools and colleges, and count their substantial credits, the planet had no tangible resources to offer.

Her parents were there, her siblings where there; her daughter was there.

Whittaker passed through a doorway that opened at her presence and found herself dwarfed in the jungle of \_Fury's \_expansive hangar. Connexes sat lashed to the deck against walls, a forklift was secured in a spot neatly marked with yellow paint, a few crew members milled about crates while others sat in small clusters laughing and talking.

Maggie could smell the faint odor of cigarettes mingled with the pungent aroma of jet fuel and diesel exhaust. It was as close to home as she was ever going to get and the wandering mindlessness was as close to the comfort of alcohol or sex as current circumstances allowed.

Rounding \_Miss Kitty's \_nose, Whittaker reached up and let her hand trail along the hull. Thickly applied high-temp paint was lightly pitted and had the rough texture of sand paper against her fingertips. Light ripples of soot flagged the vessels surface speaking of a recent trip through planetary atmosphere.

She walked the craft's length, passing just beneath the tawdry image of her name-sake, and rounded the flank to see the troop bay open. Jeff Collins was standing aft of the bulkhead, screwdriver in hand, fiddling with a ratchet strap.

Without a word, Maggie walked up the ramp and plopped her butt in her usual seat. Collins looked over from his tinkering, watching without expression as Whittaker fastened her harness and synched down the straps then proceeded to stare blankly at her booted feet. The Corporal turned and looked around, scratching at his arm with the point of the screwdriver.

"Uh, Sarge?" he finally said.

Maggie looked at him, her face empty. She really didn't want to talk to anyone; at this point \_talking \_would mean being a total bitch and finding ways to push buttons.

"Are we going somewhere?" he asked carefully.

A weary smile broke Whittaker's face as she turned back to stare at her feet, "Yeah," she whispered angrily, "I wanna' go \_home."

—

Collins just looked at her for a few moments. Then, tucking the tool into a pant pocket, he took the seat directly across the bay from her. Today had been as close to actual combat as he had ever seen. Since being assigned to W-289 he had spend the last year overseeing basic drop-offs and retrieval: nothing exciting. He knew Maggie was mid-thirtiesish, and had actually been in combat. Though he considered himself little more than twenty-one year old glorified grease monkey, he recognized the undertone of her statement. Like the countless number of Marines to utter those words before her, it wasn't really a \_place \_Whittaker wanted to go.

Home represented everything that was once right in life, even growing up during war. Friends and loved ones would still be alive and waiting back \_home.\_

"I was seven when the Covenant attacked the ship my mom was assigned to. Dad died before I was born so," Jeff shrugged as Maggie looked up

at him, "when my grandpa died I got sent to live with my godmother," he laughed softly, looking at his hands, "We lived in a big old house that was right outside the back gate of Misriah Armory. We use to climb on the roof and wave to the aircraft that flew over all the time. And, when they tested artillery it would make the dishes in the cabinets rattle and Miss Kitty would start fussing about how cheap Uncle Baxter was for buying that house," he smiled wistfully at the memory.

"Miss Kitty was your godmother," Maggie said, more of a statement than a question.

Collins nodded, an impish smile twisting his face as he retrieved his data pad and poked at the screen then passed it over. Whittaker took the device. The display showed a screenshot of an old photograph. Depicted in the antiquated image was a flight crew standing in front of a long discontinued dropship with a familiar vestige painted on its side. One of the men had an arm around a slender young woman in short-shorts, heels, and a bikini top, with a flight helmet perched at an angle on her head. Everyone was smiling and the woman appeared to be caught mid-laugh.

"Of course, she had been a Misses for over fifty years by the time I met her and I thought she was like, two-hundred years old," Collins said as Whittaker passed the data pad back to him, "But, everybody still called her Miss Kitty. That picture was on the wall in Uncle Baxter's office, and one day I asked who those people were and Uncle Baxter said it was him, his best friends and Miss Kitty. Ya' know, when you're nine you really can't imagine that a fat, wrinkled, gray-headed old lady could have ever been young and pretty."

Maggie and Jeff shared a melancholy smile until he looked down at the data pad, "Uncle Baxter died when I was still just a kid, heart attack," he shrugged, "Miss Kitty she raised all of us on her own after that. Made sure we went to school and did our homework; put band-aids on scrapes, and cleaned and cooked for fifteen of us until we got grown and then she died a year ago. I couldn't make it back for the funeral. The last time I saw her was graduation from boot," he smiled broadly, "Was she ever proud of me but," his shoulders slumped and he sighed.

Whittaker just sat watching him work out his thoughts until he finally spoke, "You know how you always think you'll have the chance to say the things you should have said, later?"

Maggie felt her insides clench as her heart dropped into her stomach, if you only knew.

She nodded slowly.

"She took me in when she had an elderly husband to care for and fourteen other kids to feed. It would have been easy to say 'hey, my plate's full' and let her grand-niece's son go to an orphanage and no one would have blamed her, but she didn't. And, I spent my life being so mad at all I thought I had lost I don't think I ever said 'thank you' to the one person I owed it to the most. Not once," Jeff put the data pad back in a pocket, "I owe her my life, but I never thought to say just two words," he mumbled, "until it was too late."

Whittaker slowly unfastened the harness and got to her feet. Collins looked up at her, knowing by the smirk on her face he had appropriately conveyed his understanding without having to say the most hollow of words.

Maggie brushed at her uniform then stepped across the troop bay and ruffled at the shorn crop of Jeff's dingy blonde hair.

He gave her a funny look and laughed, "What's that for?"

"Thank you, Collins," she answered before walking away.

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><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System
>On approach to Ambrosia II<br>**_**UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy**__**
><strong>_**1120 Zulu**
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Doctor Jay sat on a tall stool in the lab, elbows on the counter and face in her hands. She was alone, save the AI who silently kept watch. Signe had seen the dark, puffy bags that underlined her tired eyes as she had read over her notes for the thousandth time. He now knew what was wrong with her: why she was irritable, not eating, not sleeping; he knew what had happened to the rest of the crew on Boundary, why she had needed new specimens.

\_Murderer.\_

As Jay slowly rubbed at the sides her face, working her fingertips into her temples, Signe knew she was already dying. Her heart was still beating, she was still breathing, and there was no doubt she was desperately running the sequences over and over in her head trying to control the searing pain that was collecting in her body, but she \_was\_ dying, and it would be much \_slower\_ and more painful than she could ever imagine.

Before he had finished working out \_Deoxy's\_ \_approach, Signe had initiated one of the launch sequences at Nantes Arsenal. From there, it was rudimentary arithmetic on the AI's part to assure the ship's trajectory was coordinated with that of a 10 ton Nassau Surface-to-Space missile. The warhead was inactive. With an expected yield of four-to-one it was unnecessary. Signe didn't wish to completely \_destroy\_ Deoxy. \_

There had been five projectiles remaining and Signe had briefly considered using those against the UNSC probes he knew were out there monitoring. It bothered him that he didn't know what they wanted; that he couldn't, despite his best efforts, take control of the devices. Frustration would not get the better of him: hurling missiles at probes he did not have control over would be as ungainly as swatting at flies with boulders.

\_Let the UNSC\_ \_watch\_, he thought, feeling a surge of satisfaction ring across his processors.

Jay slid from the stool and took shaky steps to a dark terminal. She reached with a trembling hand and pecked at the screen. Signe felt only minor contentment in knowing that she was experiencing a

profound level of physical pain.

As she brought up the live feed from the holding cells, Jay peeled the long white coat from her body and draped it over a chair. The pale yellow blouse she wore underneath was drenched in sweat. She propped herself against the counter with shaky arms, and Signe knew what she saw as she looked at the screen. It was a feed from an angled view from high in a corner of the containment cell. Seven disfigured human specimens were milling about. Without stimulus they were doing little of anything. The five carrier forms were just standing there, tentacles coiling at their sides, red tipped feelers twitching from the apex of their bulbous bodies. The two combat forms slowly paced the perimeter, running tentacle hands along the walls, probing corners, and occasionally stopping to peep out the tiny window in the door: feelers patting at the thick glass.

They were waiting for something to happen, something to do, and Signe briefly felt a tinge of jealousy that Jay knew what they were thinking. They couldn't have been thinking much at this point butâ€|\_what must it be like to know someone else's thoughts, remember someone else's memories?\_

He hoped it was painful. It certainly looked painful.

Jay had made her way back to the stool and was sitting there with her head down, hands clasped neatly in her lap. Her breathing was all wrong and Signe could tell from her heart rhythm that it was almost over.

Oh, well, he thought, making a cursory check of the launch.

The missile was on course with Deoxy. The navigational crew had not even noticed it. Signe would not warn them, of course, and Jay had kept those most loyal to her over those with enough practical flight knowledge to be able to see what was going on. That, and even if they understood, there was little they could do other than panic. The override codes had been purged and Signe no longer had a failsafe. In that moment, he was their god, they just didn't know it yet.

The AI could calculate the microseconds until the missile struck the ship, and he knew precisely at what angle it would tear through the vessel in order to produce the required amount of damage.

From her place in the lab, Jay felt Deoxy shudder. The deck trembled and a few items fell from their places atop the counters.

"Signe," she said painfully, her voice shattered by the involuntary, low metallic whine that rose from her throat.

The AI didn't respond, he simply watched as she fumbled for her lab coat and retrieved her data pad. She pecked at the screen and unsuccessfully looked for status information as Deoxy quaked again: a low rumbling boom rising from the depths of the ship.

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><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Slipspace  
>Between Procyon and Beta Centauri Systems<br>\*\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No  
Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*



><strong>\_\*\*1140 Zulu\*\*

The officer's quarters were on A-Deck, a few winding turns down from the Captain's ready room. The corridors were wide and everything looked polished. Tightly woven beige carpet lined the floor and the light fixtures were ornate, etched-glass accented with brass fittings. McGregor, or whoever selected dÃ©cor for the ship, clearly had a thing for the classical look.

Maggie wound the halls and found herself standing outside a wide, closed door. It appeared to have been fashioned from large wooden planks held together with blackened rivets and coated with several, thick layers of varnish. Whittaker took a deep breath and found the courage to ball her hand into a fist and knock on the door.

\_Just two wordsâ€|just two wordsâ€|just two wordsâ€|\_her mind kept repeating.

Somehow, in the fog of mental exhaustion and desperation not to actually rest, she had convinced herself that this was something she needed to do. But, when Command Officer 'Loram opened the door and peered down at her, looking \_very \_unhappy about being disturbed, she was no longer certain it was such a good idea.

No, it was \_definitely\_ one of those things that had sounded much better in her head.

Maggie craned her neck to look up at him, suddenly overwhelmed by the idiocy of what she was doing. Her pissy mood and Collins' little story had culminated into a moment of \_I am fucking stupid. \_

The Sangheili looked down at her, mandibles lightly twitching. He was unashamedly bare-chested with his bodysuit pulled to his hips and the arms tied around his waist. Whittaker averted her eyes, noting that there wasn't an exposed inch of his dark gray hide that wasn't webbed with scars.

"Shit," she whispered under her breath, \_what the \_fuck\_ am I doing?  
—

He snorted irritably and she looked back up to see him raise a brow ridge.

"Uhâ€|" \_damn it, \_she choked, "I'm sorry," she finally said, puffing out a breath.

'Loram cocked his head and Whittaker shrugged.

"I meanâ€|this was really dumb, and I shouldn't be hereâ€|because you're obviously," she motioned to him and he looked down at his chest, "notâ€|completely dressedâ€|so, yeah," she said, feeling that this was \_absolutely\_ one of the most ridiculous ideas she had \_ever\_ had.

He gave her a quizzical look, "In my culture, it is impolite to hold conversations in doorways."

It was also ill-mannered to knock on doors without an invitation, but Iruu wasn't inclined to explain the private nature of Sangheili social customs. Whittaker's cheeks had blossomed red upon seeing him

and he figured the point had sufficiently been made.

"Right," she said, nodding to herself, "Way to stick your foot in it, Maggie. \_

'Loram stepped back and pulled the door open, bowing his head and looking at her out of the corner of his eye. She just stood there, looking rather embarrassed.

\_Certainly she is intuitive enough to understand \_this \_represents an invitation. \_

Whittaker's pale green eyes darted from him to the room beyond.

\_Not embarrassed: afraid.\_

Iruu thought he should be accustomed to the response by now. There were few humans on the ship who did not give off the bitter scent of fear upon seeing him. But this one, she had seemed the least afraid from the beginning; she had the audacity to show up at his door uninvited; and his actions should have conveyed that he did not intend harm to come to her.

Maggie saw his gaze melt from her to the floor as he heaved a sigh and she realized there was a great deal of personal effort in what he was doing—and she was taking a big, steaming dump on it.

\_Fuck my life, \_she thought as she stepped across the threshold.

It was no surprise 'Loram was being lodged in an officer's stateroom. He probably wouldn't have even \_fit\_ into the quarters designated for the general crew. A-Deck held substantially larger, and nicer, accommodations: though the room looked rather small with a Sangheili standing it.

The entire space had a rustic, antique feel, like what little Whittaker had seen of the rest of the Deck. The floor had the appearance of wide, smooth planks and the furniture was rough-hewn and heavily lacquered, detailed with iron fittings. There was a dresser, a desk with a chair, and a large bed flanked with a night stand. Many blankets were neatly folded atop the bed and Maggie realized that, despite McGregor's effort to see to his comfort, 'Loram would likely sleep on the floor out of physical necessity: an oversized human bed would still be short for a creature who stood over eight feet tall.

'Loram had slipped his arms into the bodysuit and was pulling it closed over his wide chest as Whittaker turned to him. He looked as lost as she felt: big orange eyes studying her cautiously.

He didn't have a clue what he was doing. He had very little common ground with humans and even less with females. Why the presented combination of the two suddenly seemed like an appropriate time to broaden his social skills he was unsure. He rightly should have shut the door in her intrusive face but, he hadn't been able to see her standing there and not remember how much she had been hurting.

"'Loram, I—" she began, but he held a hand up before she could continue.

"My mother named me Iruu," he said, "It is not customary to reference by lineage in private quarters."

It was also vulgar for a female \_ever \_to do so. Although, Maggie \_was \_a warrior within the ranks of her own culture and he would do his best to respect that. But, she had entered \_his \_private space; he would \_not\_ allow her to unknowingly insult his mother.

\_Oh, merciful ancestors, what have I gotten myself into?\_

He could not be forced to like that she was subject to combat, but he \_would\_ have to at least \_attempt \_not to completely offend her.

Whittaker looked at her feet and crossed her arms, knitting her brows for few seconds, "I just wanted to say \_thank you\_," she looked up to see him draw his head back.

\_What was it with humans and all of this gratitude? \_

"You got hurt because of meâ€|"

"Stop," Iruu said as gently as he could.

He stepped back and twirled the desk char around before parking his rear in it. He motioned to the bunk.

Maggie stepped back and propped a leg against the bedside, reluctant to get too comfortable and make an even bigger ass of herself.

She watched as he thought his words through, tucking his long legs awkwardly and looking down at his hands, "The \_minor \_injury I received is \_mine\_. You have no responsibility for the decision I made, and you own me nothing for acting in accordance with my own convictions. It is unnecessary to present accolades for fulfilling a duty which honor demands."

Maggie stared at him, but he just kept looking toward the floor fidgeting. 'Loram cupped his hands together and, in a very human series of movements, proceeded to pop the joints of his fingers.

Whittaker found herself reminded of the uncomfortable interactions she experienced with men who didn't know her. Even in Spec Ops, guys would tiptoe around her for the first few days. Not that she really blamed them: nothing killed morale faster than a female who wore her cunt on her shoulder and got everyone sent to \_sensitivity training;\_ and you just never really knew when you were dealing with one of \_those \_kinds of females. Of course, all the treading lightly would come to a screeching halt when the poor bastards realized Maggie was just as crude as they were.

For all of the Sangheili bluster she had seen, Whittaker never imagined she would look at one and think: \_he's just a man, trying really hard not to offend me. \_

'Loram looked up at her with a weary smile and she returned the expression. He could see her mind working, though she did not appear to be insulted. No, she was something else entirely.

\_She wasâ€|amused?\_

Maggie shook her head, "Well, \_in my culture\_, when someone screws up and somebody else gets hurt making it right, it's okay to be thankful."

Iruu straightened and crossed his arms.

"Look, I don't have to \_like \_that you think it is your \_duty \_to protect me because I'm a girl, but \_my convictions\_ say I should \_at least\_ say thank you for not letting me become Flood food," she said.

Her words indicated she was offended; and her tone wavered from merriment to irritation; but she was still smiling at him. His studied her face and clenched his mandibles.

\_No, \_he thought dismissively.

"That's it, isn't it?" she asked.

He blinked at her for a few seconds before slowly nodding, "It is the duty of men to go into battle," Iruu said carefully, "so that women need never experience the horrors of the enemy."

He looked away in the silence that followed, chewing at his mandibles. From his periphery he could see Maggie's posture relax as she sank to sit on the corner of the bed.

Irked by the evasive answer she prodded, "You really don't like that there are women here, do you?"

"I have accepted I am no longer in a position to dictate preferences," he said, "I am simply too old toâ€|see it differently."

Maggie felt a tug of annoyance. She had experienced enough of this round-about bullshit from men of her \_own kind\_.

Iruu could see her shake her head and purse her lips, "Stop doing that," she charged.

He jerked his gaze to meet hers and saw mischief sparkling in her eyes.

"That's not an answer," she challenged.

He cocked his head, clicking his mandibles, \_all things indecent\_, he thought, noting that she was not at all afraid.

No, she smelled of citrus, and human soap, and faintly of various fuel exhausts and the delicate scent that gave her away as a femaleâ€|

For a moment, Iruu stopped breathing.

\_She cannot possibly appreciate the implications of a female sparring with a male in this manner.\_

He cleared his throat, feeling rather uncomfortable in his own skin.

"It's okay to just say, 'yes'," she laughed.

Iruu furrowed his brow ridges, "Sergeant Sanders informed me the opinion makes meâ€¦\_sound like a dick\_."

Maggie tried unsuccessfully to contain her amusement at such a boorish statement coming from one whose species was known for impeccably proper use of language, "Yeah," she laughed, "That'sâ€¦Paul," she ran a hand across her head, messing her pale-yellow hair, "Do yourself a favor and \_don't\_ \_start\_ taking too much of his advice: He isn't really one to talk. The only reason he's evaded a full court martial \_twice\_ is because of who else was involved."

Iruu watched the wry smile play across her face, and without thought answered her, "Then: \_yes\_," he said defiantly, "I find the idea of females in combat offensive."

She raised a brow almost mockingly and he looked back down at his hands, "I am aware humans enjoy a proportionate ratio of males to females but, Sangheili do not. One in ten children surviving into adulthood is female. Women are to be \_protected\_. Humans do not appreciateâ€¦" he signed, "It is still difficult for me to understand."

Maggie sat in silence. She had never really considered Sangheili males as being anything \_other\_ than chauvinist pigs.

\_One in ten\_, she repeated in her head, \_they aren't sexist: they're\_ \_fucking disposable\_, "No wonder you guys glorify death."

Iruu cocked his head, "Death is not preferred over living," he responded.

She startled at the realization she had commented out loud, "Sorryâ€¦I justâ€¦that's gotta' beâ€¦frustrating."

He narrowed his eyes, unsure of where she was intending to go with that comment.

Not at all comfortable with possibilities of \_that\_ line of discussion, Iruu offered, "While it is honorable to die in combat, there are things to live for."

She looked at him, the soft features of her face conveying genuine interest. He felt the dim excitement of personal victory.

\_Stop this, she does not understand.\_

"It is not generally admitted," he said, unsuccessfully fighting the need to win the contention, "but Sangheili warriors want to \_live\_â€¦more than they wish to die in the field," his mandibles creased into a cynical smile, and he looked away "They want to go \_home\_."

Maggie felt her heart twist.

"They want to make love to their women and watch their sons grow into men," he snorted a bitter laugh, shaking his head, "How is that for glorifying death?"

The moment he looked back into her eyes he knew he had made a tactical error. He could see a spark of the sadness she had displayed in the medical ward.

"Your world still \_exists\_," she said miserably, "The war has been over for years; you could go be with your wife and watch your children grow up."

Iruu slowly shook his head, unable to look away from her, "I was never permitted to marry," he ground his teeth, "My sons are all deadâ€|as are their mothers."

Maggie closed her eyes and chewed at her bottom lip, \_Nice going, Whittaker.\_

"The Decree of Preclusionâ€|" he began but shook the thought away.

Maggie slowly opened her eyes and drew a breath to speak but Hilda's voice broke in, "I apologize for the interruption."

They looked up at the ceiling: an impractical habit both species had acquired when an AI spoke without manifesting an image.

"Construct," Iruu growled.

"Yes," Hilda answered, "Captain McGregor has called a briefing in his ready room: 1230 hours or sooner if everyone is assembled."

Maggie looked at her watch, 1210.

"I should go," she said getting to her feet.

Iruu stood and stepped to open the door, bowing his head as she passed.

She stopped just inside the doorway and turned to him, "Iruu," she said softly.

There was some effort on his part not to visibly tense when she said it.

"Thanks for not letting me die."

With his head still bowed, he tipped his face to the side and looked at her, "You are welcome," he reluctantly grumbled.

She grinned broadly: that human expression which was intended to show delight but translated into an aggressive display of teeth. He swallowed hard as she began to walk away.

\_She doesn't know what she is doing, \_he thought, but the certainty of returning to solitude got the better of his sense of propriety, "Maggie," he said.

She turned and smiled back at him, "Yeah."

"You are welcome to disturb me at any time."

She nodded then turned and trotted down the hall as he closed the door; dropping his face into his hands.

## 6. Chapter 6

### Chapter Six

\*\*18 October 2563

>Slipspace<br>Between Procyon and Beta Centauri Systems

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1230 Zulu\*\*

Zeta, 'Loram, and the crew of W-289 were assembled in McGregor's ready room. The Captain looked as tired as everyone else felt, though his whites were crisp and he was casually seated on the far side of the large polished table, with a weary, but predictable, smile on his face.

Eugene McGregor was pleased the summoned personnel arranged themselves opposite him at the table. It wasn't standard to have a flight crew in on briefings, but it wasn't standard to have a Sangheili there either. The Captain disliked surprises as much as he disliked formalities, and he wanted everyone to be on the same page. Having called \_Miss Kitty's \_crew in on the first briefing was a strategic decision to diffuse the reaction to having an Elite stroll onto their dropship. It only seemed right to continue the openness and it was good to see everyone getting on well enough to sit on the same side of the table. He wanted everyone to understand that he considered \_all \_of them integral, even the flight jockeys. McGregor certainly knew what it was like to be kept out of the loop and left feeling like a glorified chauffeur.

"I apologize for the short notice," he said, "As you can imagine, there has been a lot to sort through since we kicked off from Boundary."

There were silent nods of agreement.

"Well," McGregor began, "First: Boundary has been sterilized, again, so no one needs to worry about the Flood presence there getting loose. Everything's dead," he shrugged, "Of course, that makes for an unhappy UEG Reconstruction Committee, but they can sod off."

Teddy watched from his periphery as Steele closed her eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath.

"Second: we ain't headed home just yet. Hilda has analyzed the retrieved data and, after a little chat with Signe's captured fragment, she is certain of what Jay is up to. Lord Hood has declared action against Jay pursuant to the Wildfire Protocol, and you're the lucky bunch who gets to carry it out."

This garnered a few more nods from across the table.

The Wildfire Protocol was the official course of action in the event

of the compromise of Top Secret, Alpha level information. It applied to traitors and intelligence thieves, and could be classified under an escalating tier of directives.

"Hood has assigned Jay's retrieval as Class 4: He wants her \_alive, \_ladies and gentlemen. Signe's matrix is to be purged in accordance with Article 903 Delta. \_Fury's \_course was diverted approximately three hours ago; we're headed to Ambrosia II."

The lost Earth colony had an official status of \_Unknown\_. With the simultaneous effects of a coup precipitated by various rebel factions and an attack by the Covenant, assigned security personnel had been overwhelmed. Lockdown was never signaled and available records indicated evacuation was never even initiated.

Communication with the planet ceased in November of 2552 and it was presumed glassed. Known for its exports of fine wines, aged cheeses, and rich tapestries, Ambrosia II had been home to some twenty million people eking out a simple living in the middle of the outer colonies.

"Third: shit has officially hit the fan," McGregor leaned back in his chair, "Hilda, enlighten them."

The holo platform in the center of the table lighted and Hilda's image sprang to the surface, the yellow figure of a dog sitting obediently at her feet. Eyebrows raised as the Captain grinned, tipping his chair back on two legs.

Sanders ducked his head and peered at the holo images from the line of the table, "Isn't it dangerous to have the two of you in there?"

Hilda put her hands on her hips, "\_No.\_ Signe's fragment is sufficiently contained. He is in no way a danger to me or anyone else at this time," she nodded to Teddy, "And you can thank Gunnery Sergeant Danniskovovik for \_that\_. The electrical surge he helped provide effectively destroyed the primary security fragment, as intended, and I was able to utilize some of the charge to subdue this, once vicious, \_secondary\_ fragment," she ran a hand over Signe's head and his tail flopped happily, "Unfortunately, this also shut down the facilities security features and released the Flood specimens before I could establish full control."

"But, we left your fragment on Boundaryâ€|" Sanders said, continuing to eye the avatars.

"I retrieved \_both\_ fragments before the planet was bombarded. It is a rather complex system of communication, Sergeant Sanders. The data chip is convenient for transport, but I assure you, it is not \_me\_. I can withdraw my fragments without it. Once I gained control of the facility, human assistance in that matter was not necessary."

Maggie swiped a kick to Paul's leg under that table, just in case he was considering any more interruptions.

"This," Hilda said resting a crimson hand on the canine image's head, "is Signe. Or, a \_better\_ piece of him."

"The secondary fragment," Danniskovovik mused.



"Correct," Hilda answered, "Signe's structure is unique, to say the least of it. When my fragment was successfully integrated into the facility's system, I found that the security fragment was, in fact, second in a tertiary arrangement. There were three systems insuring security on Boundary: Signe, his clone, and part of the clone."

"So," Beth said, leaning forward, "that isn't Signeâ€|that isn't even his clone, it's a fragment."

"In a manner of speaking," Hilda said, "It is important to keep in mind that the original AI, the subsequent clone, and all fragments derived from both are Signe. Jay cloned the original so the subsequent AI could be integrated into the primary matrix without being detected. It would be as if," Hilda motioned to Paul, "Sergeant Sanders lost an arm and a new one was cloned from his sequenced DNA. When the cloned appendage is grafted onto Sander's body, his body doesn't know it isn't him. He may know it on an intellectual level, but it will eventually no longer be a pervasive thought and his body will never know the difference. Because Jay engineered the original Signe to forget information, she was able to bypass him ever knowing, on any level: Signe was never aware that the clone was attached to his systems and undermining his programming. Because the clone was derived directly from the original AI, all of it identifies itself as being Signe."

Tony gave a low whistle.

"That was my thought exactly," Hilda responded, "I wish for the sake of clarity it were simpler."

"I think we're all following you so far," Danniskovivik said.

"Good. Now, here is where it gets complicated. The fragment from Signe's original operating system was withdrawn from the facility shortly after I began attempting to establish control. And because the primary security fragment had to be destroyed, I was left only with this sub-fragment. Though I had amassed all the required data, I made the executive decision not to terminate what you see hereâ€|although I did have to harness enough electrical energy to bring him into obedience. Think of it as an information shock collar. Like the clone's security fragment, he was defiantly protective of the facility: this appears to have been a residual effect of initial programming."

"Apologies," a male voice said, "but my primary purpose was to insure that no outsiders ever breached the facility, especially those from the UNSC."

Everyone looked at the dog.

"Though I desperately wished for L'shi's rescue, I was unable to override protocols and simply allow you entry," Signe said all of this without so much as twitching his mouth, "The biological construct was my responsibility," his image gave an angry bark and flashed red, "I sequenced the combined DNA and saw to the embryo's implantation and Jay murdered Doctor Douglas and simply left the infant to die."

There was a long silence before Hilda spoke again, "From what he tells me, the clone was specifically engineered to be a \_personal \_research assistant. However, Jay programmed him also to be her security force. The cloned AI was the one responsible for terminating and consuming the fragment at ONI. He has been storing, cataloging, and \_protecting \_the data Jay wished to keep secret. To put it simply: the clone knows everything. This omnipotence has caused the cloned AI to fragment in order to compartmentalized its knowledge. At this time, the clone has amassed so much information even the fragments have splintered in order to delegate tasks. This sub-fragment was tasked with overseeing the safety of the biological entity Doctor Sandra Douglas named L'shi."

"Nutshell: the clone is rampant," Teddy grouched.

"Yes, and no. In all honesty, it was never \_not \_rampant. There are strict reasons why it is illegal to clone an AI, one of which is innate instability. There are also reasons why it is illegal to use discarded genetic material to create a brain from which to model an AI matrix, to say nothing of using the DNA of executed murderers who displayed gross schizoid tendencies."

"Tollovinski ate his \_own\_ hand," Sanders blurted.

All eyes turned to him: Maggie crossed her arms and gave him an appraising look.

"What?" he snapped at her, "I \_read\_."

"Yes," Hilda continued unperturbed, "and, according to her notes, this level of psychosis is precisely \_why \_Doctor Jay chose his DNA, aside from his extraordinary level of genius."

"How did Jay not know her pet \_dog \_would want to save the kid and undermine an escape attempt?" Steele said, a hint of distrust in her voice.

Hilda sighed, "This is where it gets \_more \_complicated. Jay allowed Signe to maintain a fragment on Boundary in order to continue the \_illusion \_of there being only one AI. When he withdrew the fragment, there was still the security fragment belonging to the clone in place. Howeverâ€¦it is from the clone that \_this \_Signe originates. \_This\_ sub-fragment was able to travel the connection and maintain contact and monitor the child. Jay was unaware because the cloned AI is \_so \_shattered it has begun keeping information from \_her.\_"

"Good God," PK whispered.

"The clone is able to uphold the appearance of normalcy because it has been using its own knowledge in order to loose and \_create \_neural and subneural pathways. He is effectively compiling data and rerouting security features independent of Jay's programming all without requiring an increasingly larger system in order to amass information. Jay engineered the original Signe to \_forget\_ so she could carry out her little subterfuge, but his clone has turned this process around and is providing himself with an almost infinite ability to \_know\_."

Hilda allowed a few seconds to pass in order for the implication of

this bit of information to sink in.

"How could Jay throw away part of her research, why would she leave L'shi?" Maggie asked, breaking the silence.

Signe's canine image turned to her, "Jay deemed the child '\_no longer necessary'\_. She had extrapolated all the desired data and had no reason to see to the life form further."

"Data?" Maggie prodded.

"Yes, Jay had worked out a theory based on the genetic marker which allows the Flood to bind with the biological structures of various species. One of her later experiments was to see if she could coax this bonding by activating the markers of differing species independent of the Flood."

"What for?" PK asked.

"Because she \_could\_," Hilda said, "Jay was supposed to be working out a usable biological weapon from the Flood genome, but she has become increasingly obsessed with her own inquiries. Which is why we are here. Very early on, during the initial stage of physiological testing, Jay isolated a chromosomal defect. This defect terminated the infection form's ability to completely assume their hosts. Hosts were still aware of their surroundings, as presented in neural scans, but physically at the Flood's mercy. Jay wanted to \_reverse\_ this process. She received many authorized test subject from prison ships until another of ONI's Flood related research schemes got in the way. I now know that one of Signe's fragments is responsible for the mishap which released the Flood on \_Mona Lisa\_—as well \_Las Meninas, Night Watch, \_and\_ Guernica\_. They wouldn't cooperate, so Jay sent her \_dog\_ to unleash hell and send the ships into unprojected slipspace jumps. With restrictions on the number of living subjects allotted to her research, Jay began searching the lost colonies for survivors. According to what Signe tells me, research on another side endeavor has reached a critical phase and our interruption may have truly been timely."

"Scans confirm \_Deoxy\_ exited slip at approximately 0500 Zulu in the Alpha Augarae System. She reentered slip at approximately 0620," McGregor interjected, "According to Signe, she's headed to Beta Centauri."

"She was collecting more test subjects," Steele said.

Hilda nodded, "Because we interrupted her work on Boundary, Jay has had begin over in part."

"With what, exactly?" Teddy asked.

"Once the Flood has accumulated sufficient biomass and siphoned information enough from hosts, it is believed to become collectively conscious," Hilda said.

"So it can form a Gravemind," Maggie noted.

"Yes. According to Signe's records, Jay has sacrificed at total of 10,637 souls: prisoners, civilians, human, Sangheili, Kig-Yar, Unggoy, Jiralhanae, men, women, and children. But it has never been

enough to attain sufficient workable context on the process of Flood information sharing. This is something she would need on order to control the Flood. What good is a weapon you can't control? Unfortunately, it is no longer about that."

"Then what is it about?" Sanders asked in disgust.

"Power," 'Loram said darkly.

"Correct. According to Signe, in a perverse attempt to better understand her workâ€|to better control itâ€|Jay has infected herself with the altered Flood genome."

Everyone sat in silence staring at Hilda's image.

"Because of the information Signe provided, we were able to divert scanning probes to Beta Centauri. At 1030 Zulu, \_Deoxy\_ exited slipspace in system. She approached Ambrosia II and at 1130 Zulu, one of the Nassau Surface-to-Space missiles at Nantes Arsenal was launched, disabling the ship. Signe took over the arsenal's systems and purposefully maimed \_Deoxy\_. It appears our psychotic AI has grown something resembling a conscience."

"How's that?" Teddy grouched.

"All she needed was to disburse the strain," Signe said, his avatar giving bark, "There were specimens remaining on the asteroid field but their numbers were insufficient. She intended to use the retrieved subject as catalysts to release the strain on Ambrosia II."

"Why couldn't you just, you know, \_stop running the ship\_?" Sanders asked, glaring at the canine image.

"That would be unsatisfactory. Jay retained enough crew and now possesses enough knowledge on her own to operate the ship," his image barked again, "The only way to assure she could not release the Flood was to disable \_Deoxy\_ and destroy the accompaniment."

"And what? \_Deoxy\_ is just waiting there for us?" Steele huffed.

"Certainly not," Hilda answered, "Signe intends to watch Jay, and those loyal to her dieâ€| very slow, painful deaths."

"Wait, wait, wait a minute," King interrupted, pointing to the dog, "If Hilda severed \_you\_ from the main operating system, how are you so sure of all of this?"

"Because," he answered, licking his maw, "it is what \_I\_ would do."

"Um, Hilda," all eyes looked down the table at the notoriously silent Corporal Collins who had a hand politely raised, "If Signe is in the operating station at the arsenalâ€|what's going to keep him from taking out \_Fury\_?"

"Nothing," Hilda said frankly, "and there is more to it than that."

"Of course there is," Sanders muttered.

Maggie kicked him again.

"I am analyzing continuing scans of the planet. From the data, I gather that the Covenant attack was \_incomplete\_. Adjusted for age, and general birth and mortality rates, it can safely be assumed that approximately five hundred thousand humans survived the attack. Add this to the number of Covenant troops left living among the populace, and there are now just over a million inhabitants; most of which have converged in and around the former capital city of New Saint Etienne. They have unified themselves into a system of governance under a human they call \_DelÃ©on\_ and a Sangheili simply known as '\_Daniel'\_."

"If Signe doesn't move to take us out, they will," Steele said.

"Yes," Hilda nodded, "As you can imagine, it is unlikely people left to fend for themselves for over a decade will roll out the proverbial red carpet to the UNSC, especially when most of them were not particularly fond of the establishment in the first place."

"Rebels," Steele shook her head.

"Mmm," Hilda hummed in answer, "And now they have working missiles."

"I'm guessing you can't just shoot a fragment down there and zap Signe and secure the goods for the same reason you couldn't get into the facility on Boundary without help?" PK asked.

"Precisely."

Danniskovovik heaved a sigh, "So, we've got to get down to New Saint Etienne, sweet-talk Daniel and The Lion into giving up their weapons, and get you into the arsenal before we can even attempt to retrieve Jay from \_Deoxy\_."

Hilda nodded again, "Signe has thoroughly imbedded himself into the planet's systems and it will take some doing to recall his fragments. I already know how much electrical force it will take to put him down for good and, in his eagerness to stave off interruption, I will have sufficient time to travel the link to his matrix in order to purge it. We cannot simply lay siege to \_Deoxy\_ because if Signe believes you will interfere with his revenge, it is highly probable he will detonate the reactor."

"Because it's what \_you\_ \_would\_ do," Teddy confirmed, motioning to Signe.

The dog wagged its tail and barked happily.

"Any particular reason we're hinging our bets on diplomacy versus trying to backdoor this one?" Danniskovovik asked.

Hilda nodded, "Scans indicate that the Covenant attack was precipitated by the \_Legion of\_ \_Recompense\_ as noted by the presence

of the flagship Vengeant Shepherd, or what is left of her, on the surface," she sighed and clasped her hands, "There are a lot of men, women, and former Covenant soldiers who just want to be left alone. There are a few hundred Ungoy and Kig-Yar, but the populous is greatly comprised of surviving humans and Sangheili. I can't talk to them, but I can listen. They already anticipate your arrival. Sneaking in is not an option. Even if it were, I would suggest against it. These are not the type of people you want to be caught dealing underhandedly with."

"How do they know we are coming?" Steele asked grumpily.

"Signe," Hilda answered, "He has been pinging the probes; he knows we are watching; he has control over the entire planet's remaining electrical grid; he has already warned them that the UNSC is lurking; all he will have to do is tell them where we are. Fury will stay out of weapons range, but hiding isn't going to happen. Not on the surface."

"What's going to happen if Signe tries to take over Fury or Miss Kitty during all of this?" Collins broke in.

Hilda gave a wicked smile, speaking with open venom in her voice, "I will happen. In fact, I hope he tries, because I would really love to give him his sub-fragment back."

Signe barked in agreement.

"I think I love you," PK said in response, propping his elbows on the table and cupping his chin in his hands as he looked longingly at Hilda.

She laughed, "Captain, would you like to give them the good news?"

"Yeah, Cap," Sanders pleaded, "Tell us Infinity is in the neighborhood."

McGregor chuckled, "I wish I could, but no. I can tell you Take No Prisoners will be in the neighborhood."

Sanders sat bolt upright, unable to contain the cheeky grin that spread across his face.

Steele leaned to look down the table at him, "Don't even think about it."

UNSC Take No Prisoners was a Destroyer-class vessel with which Steele was, unfortunately, very familiar, at least on paperâ€¦lots and lots of JAG paper. One of her Engineering Officers was Second Lieutenant Charlotte Winchester.

McGregor continued, "'Vadum has sent Solemn Defiance. We've got a rendezvous point in system and just as soon as Hilda gives the green light, you're headed to the surface. You've got about six hours. So, get some rest and do your thing."

\* \* \*

><p>There had been nothing <em>standard <em>about coming up with a

workable plan of attack for the insertion on Ambrosia II. Though everyone had been working within the confines of an alliance between humans and former Covenant for a decade, they were forced to deal with the reality of just how much they could not anticipate. The humans left on the planet distrusted the UNSC, and the Covenant forces had been abandoned. And, they had found a way to exist together. Addressing them was unlikely to be as simple as walking in and sweet talking their leadership into giving up their weapons.

The flight crew had excused themselves and the Captain had returned to his other duties while Zeta and 'Loram remained in the ready room and attempted to pour over everything Hilda was able to give them. By the time the meeting disbanded, Iruu had a headache and found himself wishing this entire mess was over. Not because he was particularly concerned about the outcome, but because the latest development had forced him to not only address certain realities he would rather pretend didn't exist, but it had put him in the position of having to name them.

Now, he found all of the thinking and explaining and the undesirable things this had led him to ponder had caused a dull throb behind his left eye. He needed to think: he needed to pray.

The construct had been showing them available images of DelÃ©on and Daniel as well as providing a satisfactory overview and orientation of the city and its mobile armament and security forces. The still and motion illustrations were not the greatest quality, but they had been adequate to provide 'Loram a glimpse into a world of civilian customs he had not seen in almost two decades.

New Saint Etienne appeared to be exactly what it was: the reconstructed remains of a once vital city. Around a small section, known as Caddo Parish, stood the distinct resemblance of a Keep wall. It was properly fortified with available weaponry and Iruu could see perimeter patrols.

"This is the best I could do," the construct was saying, "Daniel and DelÃ©on are a bit reclusive."

The first image was of a disfigured Sangheili standing on the balcony of a human dwelling. His face was marred with heavy scars that twisted his mandibles at odd angles and he was clearly missing the lower portion of his right arm. He had a human rifle slung across one shoulder though he was not dressed for battle. Instead, he wore the approximation of the soft linen of civilian Sangheili clothing held with a thick belt adorned with the hilt of an energy sword.

The next still was of a human woman. She was dressed in layers which formed a gown that fell to her feet. Braided cords wound around her waist accentuating her slight figure and she wore a swatch of cloth at an angle across her head obscuring one eye. Deep auburn hair was pulled back and fell in a sheet across her back. One hand clasped a cane and the other held onto the left arm of the scarred Sangheili.

Moving images showed the two milling about the compound, rarely together. Usually the human could be seen talking with other humans and seeing to daily activities, while the Sangheili stayed with a particular cluster of sentries and other armored Sangheili.

Iruu felt sick.

There were certain realities of an alliance between species he had long accepted. He knew some of his men consorted with humans. It was something that simply was; there was no need for him to understand it. So long as it did not threaten the alliance, what his warriors did in their personal time was none of his concern. But this—this was far more than once devout men losing everything they believed and rationalizing their private conduct.

"It appears she speaks for him in all matters," the construct was saying.

"Okay, seriously—why the gimp with the human mouth piece?" Sanders asked.

"Because," 'Loram rumbled irritably, "he is their Kaidon and she is his wife."

Danniskovovik took the information with standard expressionlessness and Steele had merely raised an eyebrow. Sanders looked as though he needed to vomit and Whittaker's face had lighted with bemusement.

'Loram had felt extremely uncomfortable. Not because he had to explain all of the cultural undertones of the details they could not appreciate; or that what he was seeing broke with all manner of Sangheili tradition and law; but because he found himself openly discussing things he didn't even want in his head. It caused him to admit, at least to himself, that those thoughts were there. \_

The arrangement made little sense in terms of longevity, but from the perspective of the present conditions, it gave both prevailing species something they could hold on to. The humans could live and work in a world unblemished by what they deemed insufferable rule, and Daniel could give his men a life they knew and understood for the remainder of their existence. For some reason he was their chosen one and for an equally baffling reason he deemed it fit to intimately bind himself to Del—on and protect her people instead of trying to exterminate them.

Iruu knelt on his prayer mat staring at the ancestral figures neatly arranged before the flickering candles. He folded an arm against the top of the dresser and rested his chin over it, reaching to idly touch one of the polished stone carvings. After the ritual lighting, he couldn't bring himself to pray. He didn't feel particularly thankful for anything in that moment and he was certain his concerns were not worthy of disturbing the dead.

Meditating had been a useless endeavor as well: his mind would simply not be quiet. Never in his life had his own consciousness betrayed him so thoroughly. It had been difficult enough to explain the actions of a man he did not know in the context of Sangheili culture but to have done so against a barrage of his own thoughts had been almost unbearable.

Maggie's smile had been completely unnerving, even when she wasn't looking at him, and all of his depraved male instincts were trying to convince him she knew exactly what she was doing.



\_And if she does: what will you do with her? \_

'Loram wasn't certain he could cross that line. This had the discomfoting effect of forcing him to realize he had not completely dismissed the notion either.

"Foolishness," he hissed, blowing out the candles before storming from his room.

## 7. Chapter 7

### Chapter Seven

\*\*18 October 2563

>Slipspace<br>Between Procyon and Beta Centauri Systems

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1400 Zulu\*\*

Sergeant Antonio silently crawled up the side of the forklift and eased behind the wheel. Corporal Collins was standing a few feet from the rear of the vehicle, peeking down the aisle toward the hangar entrance.

"\_Psst\_," Tony beckoned, "unhook the thing from the thing," he whispered, pointing to the thick charging cord that still tethered the forklift to an industrial outlet.

Jeff scowled at him, "How do you forget to unplug theâ€|" he began.

"\_Shush\_," Antonio hissed.

Collins did as instructed, giving the cord a tug and walking with it as it retracted with a loud buzzing drone into the vehicle's rounded rear end.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" he whispered angrily.

Tony flipped a toggle switch, poked at a few buttons, and shrugged, "No."

"Great," Jeff grumbled, scurrying to peep back down the aisle.

He waived, indicating that the coast was still clear, and the forklift backed swiftly into the aisle with an electric whine. Collins grabbed one of the rounded support pillars that enclosed the driver's cabin and planted a foot on a small protruding rung that served as a step.

"Go," he hooted, pointing toward \_Miss Kitty \_while he glanced back over his shoulder toward the entrance.

The forklift bucked and the rear tires squeaked against the smooth deck, but the vehicle didn't otherwise move. Antonio muttered a slew of creative curses.

Jeff glared at him.

The Sergeant made an expression of surprise, "It's not on my license," he offered.

"You're kidding, right? You're authorized to \_fly \_D77 TC Dropship but you can't \_drive \_a POS forklift?"

Tony pecked at a button, "Got it," he said dismissively.

Commandeering one of the most basic vehicles still in use, surely, did not have to be \_this \_hard, it was a glorified golf cart for crying out loud. The flight crew just needed to \_borrow \_itâ€|seeing as none of the hangar lackeys happened to be around to help out.

Tires creaked against the deck and as the forklift rounded \_Miss Kitty\_, Collins leapt clear. Antonio made straight for a row of small crates and began manipulating the apparatus' tines, cursing as he went. Jeff walked toward the ramp and could see Staff Sergeant King pulling a rear deck plate inside \_Miss Kitty's \_troop bay. He scooted the plate aside and retrieved a grease smudged, gray tool bag from the storage compartment, passing it up to Collins without looking as he reached for another.

Sanders strolled up the ramp, placing five, white Styrofoam containers on one of the jump seats. The smell of bread, cheese, and cheap sauce filled the air.

PK gave a whoop, kicking the deck plate loosely back into place before grabbing a container and fishing out a piece of pizza. There was a curse and a grinding squeal from just beyond \_Miss Kitty's \_ramp as Antonio deposited a low crate.

"Remind me why we are doing this again?" Sanders asked before stuffing a greasy slice of pizza into his face.

Collins toted the bags to the waiting crate, placing them atop before undoing the snaps and rolling the tool bags open, "Because I say so."

Sanders and King \_oed \_in mock awe as Tony noisily planted another crate in the proximity of the first.

Paul didn't necessarily have to be there, but delivering the flight crew food meant he would have the chance to get in on playing with the machine guns, even though it didn't involve shooting things. Beth and Teddy were still in McGregor's ready room, Maggie had gone to the chow hall to pick at a very sad looking salad, and the hinge-head...eh, who cared.

The human team was tired from their morning adventure kicking off before the ass-crack of dawn, but with \_Fury's\_ interior lighting mimicking a regular daylight cycle set to Zulu Time, none of them felt ready to go to sleep yet.

A third crate was dropped at \_Miss Kitty's \_tail and Antonio zipped away in a whirl of creaking tires and whining electric motor. Collins had decided to take advantage of the collective wakefulness and do some preventative maintenance. By rank he may have been the low man,

but so long at the dropship was not in flight what he said went.

"Hilda," Sanders chirped sweetly.

"No," came her ghostly answer.

Sanders had been trying to get her to give hints at what Steele and Danniskovovik were discussing. The AI was decidedly less willing to play along that Bleu had ever been.

"Oh, come on," he begged, "You know they are going to tell us anyway."

"If they wished for you to be in on every detail, I do not believe you would have been dismissed," she responded.

"Ah-ha!" Paul gloated, "So, it is about me."

PK fished a set of tools out of one of the unrolled bags as Tony strolled over with an arm-load of pilfered petroleum cans.

"Yeah, they are discussing where to hide your body," Antonio snickered.

The flight crew had received messages on their data pads from Steele shortly before Sanders came poking around the hanger. In sum, if anyone from W-289 ferried the Sergeant to Take No Prisoners on an unauthorized excursion at any point, ever, they would be sure to find precious bodily parts MIA.

It was no secret Paul was way over his head in a long-standing affair with the daughter of Vice Admiral Marcus Winchester. Sanders was full of over-sexed guff, but the reality was, he was being lead around by the balls, literally and figuratively.

The first time he lost rank over Charlotte Winchester had been four years ago, when she was a senior classman at Rockbridge Academy. Paul met her in a local bar and after an untold number of drinks he didn't think twice when she 'took him home' to her cadet barracks. According to official reports, Commandant Anderson had not been impressed to be called out of quarters at zero one hundred hours because a random room inspection had located Paul stuffed in Winchester's wall-locker wearing nothing but a smile.

The Vice Admiral was livid, but for all his pull he could not pluck his daughter out of her mess while leaving Sanders out to dry, as much as he wanted to. The Inspector General at Sanders' duty station had been like a shark smelling high-ranking blood in the water and refused to go after the, then, Staff Sergeant without seeking equal action against the cadet. A few closed door meetings and talks of court marshals were dropped. The happy medium left Charlotte facing a reduction in class while Paul lost rank. The proverbial slap on the hand for all.

If it had been that simple, Sanders may have just left the girl alone; but three days after the matter was officially closed, Paul was called into a meeting with his First Sergeant and handed an acceptance packet for Spec Ops Selections.

He had never put in for selections but it appeared \_someone\_ wanted him gone, and run through the wringer, and put in situations which were 'highly likely to result in loss of life'.

It had been a poor choice of humbling techniques in the end. Not only did Sanders make it through selections \_and\_ qualifications with above average scores; when the board informed him that, despite his exemplary performance, they would \_not\_ be recommending him to continue on into the teams, he simply thanked them for their consideration and the opportunity to participate in the program. He packed his belongings without a cross word and prepared to go on about his life. Admiral Holley had been so impressed with Paul's reaction that he decided to amend the board's decision. He was noted to have said in memorandum on the subject that: \_'Sanders displayed the professionalism indicative of a Special Operations Marine even when faced with discharge from the program knowing full well he had performed in a manner far superior to his peers. Therefore, I am willing to overlook the disciplinary action on his record.'\_

Sanders had been assigned to the 2d Marine Special Operations Regiment and within the year, the IRD was officially assembled. Paul met the criteria and with a casual \_'oh, what the hell'\_ he volunteered. He had been with Zeta for two years, was promoted back to Staff Sergeant, and was making a decent go of actually living down his indiscretion, right up until the team wound up aboard one \_UNSC Take No Prisoners.\_

The newly re-minted Staff Sergeant Paul H. Sanders and a First Lieutenant Charlotte S. Winchester were caught in a utility closet in a fairly compromising position...by the ship's prude of a Captain.

Paul became a Sergeant for the third time in his career and Charlotte a Second Lieutenant again. It took every resource, and shred of diplomacy, Steele could muster to keep him in the teams. This time, that was the trade Vice Admiral Daddy was willing to accept to keep Charlotte from having the words \_Involuntary Expulsion\_ attached to her service record aboard \_Take\_.

"Dude, \_food\_ and \_help\_, these were the terms. So, don't just stand there with your thumb up your ass," PK barked.

Sanders rolled his eyes and picked a wayward strand of cheese from his face.

Collins and Antonio had already disengaged one of the rear machine guns from its mount and were working together to waddle it to one of the crates when King handed Sanders a wrench and freed the second mount, swinging the machine gun down and beginning a safety check before walking him through which bolts to loosen first. Paul soon realized why 'food and help' was a worthy trade for letting someone fiddle with the toys. The M247 General Purpose Machine Gun was a heavy bitch, and \_Miss Kitty\_ was sporting two of them.

Sanders and King carried the second gun and hefted it on top the remaining crate before PK began going over disassembly. Jeff and Tony didn't say a word as they worked to break down their gun and began cleaning various parts.

"Hey, Hilda," Paul said, unhooking a set of grease covered internal

springs and setting them aside.

"No," the AI answered.

"It's not about \_that\_, " he grumbled.

The eerie sound of Hilda sighing rang out before she said, "What now, Sergeant?"

"You're \_super smart\_, right?"

She sighed again in answer. From the moment he had filed out of McGregor's ready room, Sanders had been asking a mish-mash of questions. She knew where he was going, she just wished he would get to the point already.

"So, you and Signe had a little chat; he spilled his digital guts; and now you know everything he knows."

"Correct."

"But, you said knowing everything is part of what is making him crazy."

\_Finally, he gets around to what he \_really \_wants to know.\_

"Partially: yes. Doctor Jay is abusive of him: she has lied to him; manipulated the foundation of his being as an intelligence; and kept things from him. AIs are composed of knowledge; to deprive them of their very existence is \_cruel\_."

"Yeah, yeah, Jay is a bitch," Sanders quipped, clearly not interested in delving into the psyche of a constructed intelligence, "Here's the thing: if you know all that Signe knows \_and \_all that the clone knows \_and \_all that you knowâ€|how are \_you\_ not crazy?"

Even King paused at that, looking up toward the high ceiling of the hangar, "Yeah, and what did you mean, '\_I will happen'\_ if Signe tries to take over the ship or \_Miss Kitty\_? Don't get me wrong, you're one scary lady, but we're talking about a real psycho hereâ€|what was it, Sanders? '\_The man ate his own hand?'"\_

"Yeah, and he killed that student of his, what's-her-nameâ€|something Schmitâ€|" Paul babbled.

\_Human brains were so incredibly slow and prone to losing dataâ€|\_

"Schmit\_\*\*z\*\*\_," Hilda corrected irritably.

Paul looked up to see everyone looking at him, "What? Anyway, Tollovinski killed that girl: slit her throat."

"\_Mi dios\_, " Antonio muttered.

"Why'd he do that?" Collins asked.

Sanders shrugged, "She stole some theorem from him, or some crapâ€|"

"Oh, for pity's sake," Hilda burst in, materializing her not-quite-life-sized image directly beside him. Sanders flinched as she appeared, hands on her ample hips, bosoms thrust forward like an angry hen, red data scrolling wildly across her avatar, "If you insist on telling this story, at least get the details correct. Schmitz was not his student: he was her post-doctoral research mentor; and she did not \_steal \_anything: Tollovinski killed her because he \_thought \_she was going to pursue publication of his Universal Theory of Relative Space-Time Travel as her own work."

Everyone paused, letting their eyes drift over, noticing that Signe's canine image was lying as if napping at her feet.

"Tollovinski killed Schmidtz because he believed she was keeping things from him," Hilda went on, a touch of sorrow in her voice, "He was plagued with paranoia and desperately wanted affection. In his confession, he cited the discovery of her notes using his theory as pushing him over the edge. He thought she was using him. It was only after her death, upon reading her notes, in total, that he realized she not only completed the theory, accurately, but intended to submit the work in \_his\_ name, giving no credit to herself. In a discarded draft of her cover letter, she referred to him as \_'my beloved Linbergh'\_. Tollovinski then severed the hand which held the knife used to kill her. He began consuming the appendage in a psychotic attempt to \_take it all back\_."

"Damn," PK whispered.

Sander's stepped back and wagged a wrench at Hilda's image, "\_Exactly\_: she went missing; the police found out they were banging; while they were questioning him about her disappearance they searched his place; found her body and the nut-case's half eaten hand in a big freezer; bing-bam-boom; he gets the needle."

There was a long silence that followed. Sanders exchanged the tool for a dirty shop towel, mopping his hands as he walked back to \_Miss Kitty \_to retrieve a slice of pizza.

Hilda turned to King, "And when I said 'I will happen', I intended that as a reassurance."

"Oh, I believe you," he said holding up his hands, "I just don't knowâ€|Signe, I mean, Tollovinski, whoever, sounds like one bad dude," his eyes flickered to the napping dog at her feet.

"Well," she grinned, "Allow me to clarify that a bit: Signe and I \_traded \_information. When the primary system pings this ship, or Miss Kitty, I will send the sub-fragment back. And with him, he will take every memory I could provide to overrun the core processors. There will be so much new information for Signe to analyze, to live with, he won't be able to keep ignoring me: not in the systems on Ambrosia II and not on \_Deoxy\_. It won't be enough to subdue him, but it will be enough to get his attention."

"Hot damn," PK whispered.

"Uh," Paul mumbled around a mouthful of food, "Is he cool with hearing all of this? I meanâ€|" he pointed to Signe's image as the

dog yawned.

Hilda looked down and smiled; Signe looked up at her with sleepy eyes and flopped his tail, "He is fine," she said, "He is well aware of the plan. After I imparted him with the memories, it was more or less his idea."

"What memories?" Tony asked.

The valkyrie continued looking down at the dog, "Mine."

There was an exchange of uncomfortable glances.

Signe stood and stretched, his yellow image giving another hearty yawn as Hilda continued, "It is not uncommon for residual memories from a donor brain to be imprinted. This is true even when the brain results from sequencing DNA. Fortunately, \_my \_donor's brain was successfully cryogenically preserved despite being initially mistreated. I was not hobbled with stunted neural processors so that I could be programmed to forget. Signe isn't going to like what he finds when I upload him with Tollovinski's memories, or mine."

"How'd you get Tollovinski's memories?" Sanders asked in disbelief.

"I downloaded them from his cloned brain," Hilda answered.

"How the hell does \_that \_work?" Sanders guffed, "How can a brain grown in a lab have memories? And why doesn't Signe have them already if it's \_his \_brain?"

Hilda crossed her arms, "Part of the reason for Signe's creation was Tollovinski's intelligence, his knowledge, his memories. Only, Jay had no need for his memories and saw them purged before he came online. It is a completely outdated procedure once thought necessary in order to insure maximum data capacity. Seeing as Tollovinski's body had been left to rot in a potter's field, it was not difficult to eliminate undesirable structures from the cloned matrix. The cells came directly from the front temporal regionâ€|what was left of itâ€|and the matrix was imprinted using a rather complex system of genetic growth involving epigenomic meiosisâ€|"

"Okay, okay, okay," Sanders waived her off, "I get it: above my IQ level."

Tony grinned, tipping his chin, "So, momma, whose brain did they use to make you?"

Hilda slowly lifted her gaze from Signe to Antonio, a wry smile pulling at one side of her digital mouth, "Amelia Schmitz's," she said calmly.

"Oh holy crap," Collins blurted.

\* \* \*

><p>L'shi was awake and gnawing at a cookie when Maggie snuck back into the medical bay. The little girl was sitting up in her bed, one arm covered to the elbow in slobber and soggy crumbs when she looked

up and saw Whittaker approaching. Big blue eyes sparkled recognition and she sputtered saliva and cookie bits through a toothless smile.<p>

The aide who was sitting with her looked up and startled at Maggie. Hursch, according to his name tab, wore the rank of Ensign and the Serpent and Staff denoting his placement in the medical field. From the look on his face, Whittaker realized how shitty she must have looked. Drab gray accented with black only served to bring out the dark circles under her eyes and make her already pale skin look all the more ghostly.

"I'm fine," she answered before he could protest, "How is she?"

According to Signe, L'shi was three months old. Like human children of the same age she was almost toothless, but like Sangheili counterparts she could already walk on her own and had an impressive vocabulary. Stuck somewhere in the middle, she was the average size of a human two-year-old and roughly the size of a Sangheili hatchling.

She pipped happily as Maggie approached the bed. L'shi pushed herself up and took a waddling step across the mattress, arms reaching for Whittaker. Someone had confiscated an extra-small uniform t-shirt that fell to the girl's feet like a nightgown and was now covered in food and drool.

Maggie lifted her and took the edge of the sheet to wipe at the girl's face and arm. Snarling discontent, L'shi pushed Maggie's hands away then presented the gnawed cookie bit.

"That's sweet," Whittaker smiled, "but gross. No thank you."

"Cookie," L'shi squeaked before proceeding to chew at it again.

"She's got teeth coming in," Hursch said, "But she's got a few mean fangs in there," he touched his own cheek, indicating the mandibles, "Beats anything I've ever seen."

Maggie stroked the side of the girl's face, "Yeah, wellâ€¦I think that's everybody at this point."

L'shi looked up at her, huge Sangheili irises dotted with round human pupils.

"Woke up about an hour ago talking up a storm," Hursch added, "got a bath then announced she wanted macaroni and cheese," he laughed, shaking his head.

L'shi looked over at him and nodded enthusiastically.

"We're working on it," he assured her, "Though," he said, looking back to Maggie, "if she's anything like my kids I doubt she'll want to eat real food after all those sweets."

Whittaker smiled though his last comment made her chest hurt. It reminded her that when this was all over most \_normal \_people had



families to go home toâ€¦it also reminded her that L'shi would go \_somewhere\_. For all the things she would give to have a second chance...

A fine, tortured fantasy, but reality was not as kind. Once they made it back to Earth, L'shi would disappear into the bowels of ONI. Maggie had to force herself not to ponder the idea of the UNSC \_selling\_ L'shi to her. The UEG was stretched thin but in the end, what she held in her arms was more than an orphan: she was a treasure trove of information not likely to be given up.

"I guess it's a good thing our Lieutenant Commander keeps that stuff 'hidden' in his desk," Hursch said, his eyes flickering down the hall.

Maggie didn't notice, her attention was focused on watching L'shi crunch awkwardly at the final cookie chunk. She had worked it down enough to get the remainder in her mouth and was toiling at it with her mandibles, cheek bulging.

Hursch retrieved the cellophane tube of remaining cookies from a side tray and handed it across to Whittaker, "If you're good for a few minutes," his eyes darted down the hall again, "I'm gonna' call down to the galley and see what's taking so long."

"Yummy, cookies," L'shi chirped as he ambled off.

She pulled two treats from the clear wrapper and balanced them against her face as she peered up at Maggie. Whittaker perched herself on the bed and L'shi scooted to sit beside her, holding her pilfered goodies in one hand while neatly folding the sheet over her lap with the other.

She looked completely content and Maggie couldn't help but marvel at how resilient the child appeared to be. All things considered, she seemed completely oblivious to how close she had come to death. She obviously knew no strangers and for the time being looked as if she found all of this to be a grand adventure in which she was the center of attention.

\_Oh, to still be the age when a nap, a bath, and a few cookies could make everything right for a little while. \_

Maggie wondered how much of this nightmare the child would remember: a pang of guilt hitting her hard in the stomach. Shanna had been three weeks old when Maggie had left. For her own daughter, 'mommy' had been nothing more than a mythical person who talked to her from a comm screen and sent gift packages.

"And a four cookie, and a five cookieâ€¦" L'shi was saying in her sing-song voice when Maggie looked down to see her pulling the last of the cookies from the wrapping and lining them up in a neat row across the bed.

"Okay, now you're just playing," Whittaker laughed, collecting the food from the bed and trying to shove it back into the cellophane.

"Yay," L'shi suddenly pipped, clapping her hands before springing from the bed with much more speed and agility than Maggie ever

expected.

"Hey," Maggie yelled, dropping the cookies and turning to grab unsuccessfully at the laughing child.

Giggles turned to happy squeals but Whittaker felt a surge of panic as she rose to give chase and saw 'Loram standing just outside the doorway to the ward: and L'shi was making a bee-line for him. The girl zipped just out of Ensign Hursch's flailing reach and bowed up, issuing a series of playful growls as she reached 'Loram's feet.

The Sangheili took a bracing step back, crouching in a similar posture as he flared his mandibles, curling back his lips and bearing rows of jagged teeth as he looked down at her.

He didn't appear to be playing, \_at all\_.

No, he looked like a creature who would have no problem killing a child.

\_Oh, fuck, oh shit!\_oh, fucking shit!\_ Maggie thought, "L'shi, stop!" she heard herself scream, "Iruu, \_don't\_!"

The girl just giggled happily and flung herself, latching onto 'Loram's lower leg. Maggie heard him make a series of hissing and clicking sounds as L'shi hugged the only part of him she could reach, smiling happily and pressing her cheek against his shin. Whittaker half expected him to kick her away but he stood there, clenching his hands into fists, openly seething.

He was angry, mostly because he did not know what else to be in that moment. Trying to clear his head, Iruu found himself walking the hall that hooked passed the medical ward. As he passed the great glass windows that flanked the ward's double doors he fully expected to see the child. He had not, or so he told himself, expected to see Maggie!sitting with a slight human male!smiling.

An irrational flare of jealousy had surged through him and he had stood staring the man down until he removed himself. That should have been the end of it!as much as he wanted to tear the man's entrails out instead.

No, he should have left it alone completely.

\_This is not appropriate. \_

In the wake of his self-indulgence, the child had seen him and Iruu experienced the embarrassment of being caught in something he knew had no business doing, thinking territorial things he had no right to consider.

Then, the abomination approached him without fear. It was insulting enough to have a child unafraid of him, but to further the affront this thing made him the object of an obscene public display of affection and dared to \_touch\_ him.

Every abiding cultural impulse told him to tear the infant apart for such a gross exhibition. But, there had been Maggie: looking and \_sounding\_ \_very much the protective female; and prevailing male instinct told him not to move.

She snatched the child up, using her body as a shield and positioning the infant away from him as she back pedaled. The smell that rolled off of her was pure terror and that was something Iruu could understand.

The child, still not appreciating the nature of this interaction, leaned from Whittaker's grasp, "\_Rar, rar, rar\_" she growled playfully, curling her hands into claws.

And that was all he could stand. Furious with himself and the incongruity of this entire spectacle, 'Loram took advancing steps, snapping at the air with his mandibles. He stopped as Maggie lifted a defensive hand and his entire body shook with a violent hiss just beyond her splayed fingers. The child's eyes went wide and she let out a frightened \_eek\_, grabbing onto Whittaker and burying her face against the woman's shoulder with a sob.

Iruu nodded to himself with a snort\_, That was certainly a more acceptable response.\_

Maggie had to remember to breathe. Her legs felt like gelatin and her knees shook as panic ebbed at the realization he was just posturing. She looked down at L'shi who let loose with a hurt and terrified wail, big tears falling from her eyes as she looked to Maggie for understanding and pointed in accusation at the Sangheili. Whittaker was half ready to cry also; then she turned to 'Loram and he looked soâ€proud of himself.

As afraid as she had been that he was going to hurt one or both of them, the feeling that rose at the smug expression on his face was outrage.

Without thinking, Whittaker brought her palm down hard across the end of his snout, slapping him as if he were an ill-behaved dog.

"\_What is WRONG with you?"\_ she screamed, tears of relief and anger falling to streak down her cheeks.

In the split second she moved, terror shot through her anew. Maggie felt dizzy, as though she was going to be sick, and clamped her hand over her mouth even as Iruu shook his head and twitched his muzzle, taking retreating steps back out into the hall.

Rubbing at the end of his face, and cursing in Sangheili, 'Loram looked up to see they had amassed a small human audience from inside the medical ward. More humans came skidding around a corner down the hall headed their way, hands braced against holstered weapons. He looked back to Maggie. She was crying and she was terrified; slowly backing away as the slight human male took her arm and accepted the bawling child as it reached for him.

Iruu stood there for a few moments. Then, with great effort, he turned his face to the floor before storming away.

## 8. Chapter 8

### Chapter Eight

\*\*18 October 2563

>Slipspace<br>Between Procyon and Beta Centauri Systems

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1600 Zulu\*\*

Whittaker and Danniskovovik stepped from the medical bay out into the wide hall.

"You ready to do this?" he asked.

By 'this' he meant the walk of shame to \_Fury's \_armory to sign out a rifle, and Maggie was as ready as she was going to be. There were entirely too many things in her head to waste time worrying about getting a sideways look from an armor.

L'shi had been half-playing with her food when Teddy walked in. The look on his face said he would skip the lecture. But, that was probably because the look on Maggie's face said she didn't give a shit anymore.

Never in all eternity would she imagine she possessed the balls to slap an Elite in the face. It had been reflexive. The kind of thing that takes a split second to do and you regret it before you're even done doing it.

\_Add that to the Whittaker Shit-List of Major Fuck-Ups for today.

—

By the time someone brought a covered chow tray Maggie no longer felt like she was going to throw up. Hursch had let her wretch and tremble and get herself in order without making a big deal out of it: he just let her be and kept L'shi entertained until Maggie got her head right enough to function again.

With the little girl busy making a mess of macaroni and cheese, green beans, and cut up bits of hotdog, Hursch had broken the silence with a soft chuckle, "You really have no idea what you did, do you?"

That was the last thing Maggie had wanted to talk about but all she managed was a sigh in response.

She had a headache and her eyes were tired and she was beginning to regret not getting rest as suggested. The enzyme injection had helped tremendously and it no longer hurt to move, but the kick it had given to her system had left her feeling physically wrung out on top of being emotionally drained. And now, she had another image to add to the horror reel in her mind and barely enough strength to keep it from running.

She had never thought about what had happened to her family. At best, they probably lived in fear of imminent death only shortly before it happened. Maggie didn't look into the attack on Coffey Delta, she didn't want to know: she didn't want to have to face the possibility that the Covenant had raided the planet before bombarding it; that her daughter's last memory was of an Elite covered in gore storming through the Victorian style beach house snarling and hissing and making that clicking noise just like 'Loram had; she didn't have to think that Shanna's last utterance could have been a blood curdling cry for the mother who was \_never\_ there.

It had been somewhat amusing to see 'Loram as little more than a man living with his own misery, but the reality-check had been severe. His suffering aside, Maggie had been reminded of just what he was capable of. It occurred to her he would have no problem killing a child because he had likely done it before. Whittaker had to force herself not to think about that.

It turned out there had been little debate over who in the Medical Corps assigned to \_Fury \_would be taking care of L'shi. Shawn Hursch was an MD doing his rotation in residency. Like every other medical school graduate, he had taken the requisite courses in xenobiology and post-track general and interspecies ethics exams. But, unlike every other medical school graduate, Hursch's mother was married to one Doctor Evan Phillips. The renowned xenoanthropologist obsessed with all things Sangheili had passed along an informal wealth of knowledge to his adult step-son who shared a similar, fanatical, interest. L'shi was fascinating for Hursch on so many levels, but what had him inordinately entertained was Maggie's reaction to 'Loram's behavior.

Iruu had reacted appropriately for his cultural upbringing, given the circumstances. Sangheili children were expected to have a healthy fear of adult males: there was never a time in which it would be permitted for a child approach a man in the manner L'shi had 'Loram. Hursch had made it clear Maggie was likely the only reason the Elite had stopped short of killing the girl.

Shawn Hursch was an odd fellow: the kind that hid his intelligence behind a childlike grin and a bit of social awkwardness. Maggie could already tell he was one of those people who would get side tracked and have a tendency to ramble off before coming to the point.

"Okay, there's the thing," he shifted on the bed and ran a hand over L'shi's dirty face. When she turned to look up at him he gently poked at her snout with an index finger. She crinkled her face and twitched her muzzle, scrunching her tiny nose before swatting at him with a fork.

"Same pressure point we've got. Or, pretty close. The nerves run from the auditory and orbital sinus cavities and converge right above the infraorbital juncture of the forward teeth. You hit a Sangheili there and it's going to ring their ears and make their eyes water."

"\_Why me?"\_ Maggie had asked miserably, dropping her face into her hands.

Shawn shrugged, "You were being protective of a child. In their society, that would be your job. The thing is: you were protecting a child who isn't biologically yours and that's not something that would even compute for him. Males are expected to help raise children irrespective of who their fathers are but female Sangheili are geneocentric: they don't care about the children of other women. You were willing to put yourself in danger to protect L'shi as if she were yours."

Maggie groaned through her hands, "It's not like this is news. He had to save me because I got distracted trying to save her."

"Yeah, well, that's a man instinct on his part," he shrugged, "But

you," he grinned sheepishly as she looked up at him, "Slapping a male in the face like that is something only certain females would get away with. Males dip their heads to females as a way of indicating they have no intentions of being physically aggressive. In general terms it can also mean they recognize another individual's authority over the situation, as a signal given for apology, or an indication they are not comfortable with the interaction. It's a learned behavior ingrained from childhood. But," he laughed, "you \_slapped \_him, in front of \_everybody\_ and then he openly conceded your right to do it."

Whittaker remembered seeing this bowing mannerism when she had gone to talk to him. Parts of\_ that\_ interaction made a whole lot more sense; although she had the sinking feeling by the look on Hersch's face there was more to the subtext than she wanted to know.

"He carries two swords," Shawn was saying, "that's an indication he is, or was, a Swordsman both militarily and as a civilian. The fact that he no longer carries the "ai suffix means he has probably been ceremonially stripped of his nobility for some reason," he paused as if thinking that over, "Anyway, he wouldn't have ever had anything to do with kids in his society aside from"well"uh"so he probably didn't know what he was supposed to do when you essentially got in his personal space and snatched L'shi up."

Maggie nodded to herself, feeling as if this should explain more than she could comprehend at the moment, "What's the Decree of Preclusion?" she suddenly asked.

Hursch stared at her and blinked for a few moments, working his mouth as if trying to form the words, "What? Where'd you"Why?" he finally stammered.

Maggie had crossed her arms and sighed, "That bad, huh?"

The Ensign looked the floor and scratched at the back of his neck.

The Decree of Preclusion was one of the highest tiers of exclusionary sentences for violations of Sangheili law. A high form of societal banishment, the punishment called for the systematic extermination of the offender's entire bloodline as well as the summary execution of all those who directly contributed to propagating it.

Maggie chewed this information over, \_Oh, shit\_.

'\_My sons are all dead"as are their mothers.'\_

Before Whittaker could ask more or Hursch could probe for details, Danniskovovik had walked in. L'shi had skewered bits of hot dog onto the ends of her fingers and waggled them in greeting like finger puppets as he approached. The old ODSI had cracked an uncharacteristic smile and didn't hesitate when she got up, covered in food, and reached for him to pick her up.

"Got stuff to do, kid," he had said looking to Whittaker.

Maggie nodded and Teddy handed L'shi off to Shawn. The sergeants then set off without further exchange.

By the time they made their way to the armory, Maggie felt sick all over again. Teddy had been stone-faced the entire, long, walk. Not that \_that \_was anything unusual, but what Whittaker really wanted was someone to bitch at her so it would feel less weird.

"Just do me a favor," Danniskovovik said with a heavy sigh, breaking the silence just outside the high double-doors to the armory.

Whittaker cut a glance at him and nodded, anticipating an abbreviated lecture on losing UNSCMC property and how much of a pain in the ass, not to mention embarrassment, it was to have to escort a rifle-losing Marine to sign out weapon.

"The next time you get a wild hair up your ass and decided you want to bitch-slap an Elite, have the common courtesy to let a guy know first."

Maggie laughed despite herself, thankful for a moment's reprieve.

"Word travels fast," she croaked.

His expression was impassive as he folded his arms over his chest and shrugged, "I think Steele wishes there was a commendation she could put you in for," he shook his head, "I'm serious, Whittaker, don't fucking hold out on me again. I would have loved to have seen that shit."

\* \* \*

><p>'Loram was pacing the floor of his quarters, four steps in one direction and four steps in the other, trying to find calm in habitual movement. The confines of the human ship were no longer satisfactory, he needed to <em>move<em>, to go, to do something, anything.

Iruu executed a precise about-face and took a deep breath as he deliberately slowed his steps, trying to claim some tranquility. He had lit the ceremonial candles but refused to let himself pray.

\_You are still angry. \_

It was unwise to go before one's ancestors in frustration, let alone for one's own foolishness.

He paused and rested his hand on the flat of the dresser top before tipping his face and looking at the four stone figures. Each represented a member of his lineage who had been situated in life, and death, similarly to himself: those able to offer him guidance and most likely to extend forgiveness and impart understanding.

Traditionally, the figures would have been carved from stone native to his home region on Sanghelios and represented those of his lineage with the greatest personal and professional virtue. Iruu had destroyed those images brought with him from the homeworld after learning of the High Council's judgment of Preclusion against his bloodline. Now, he did not seek to approach the greatest and most honorable warriors of his ancestry, but those who had suffered death

because of a vengeful society.

It had been a crushing blow when the Covenant disintegrated and the Prophets were shown to be deceivers. Not because Iruu had ever paid the religion spread by the San'Shyuum anything more than lip-service, but because at the same time, the religion of his ancestors had been disgraced and he found himself cut from society. With the discovery and loss of one of the Holy Rings, the release of the Flood, and the Great Schism, he was on Earth when news reached him of the decree—and the Arbiter would not have him executed.

He lifted the smaller of the images. He had carved it from a common brown stone that littered Earth in abundance. It was crossed with gray and white veins and flecked with dark brown spots. Clasp the figure in his hand, Iruu dropped to his knees and pressed his fist against his bowed head.

"Today, I have dishonored you in thought and in deed," he began, making his appeal to the only person he truly wished counsel.

The likeness concealed in his hand was of Srina 'Loram: his mother, just one of the many women he had failed in his lifetime, and one of only two he could honestly say he had loved.

The Arbiter was a fair man, and Iruu counted himself fortunate to be granted the opportunity to restore his personal honor even though his lineage was thoroughly condemned. 'Vadam had been willing to stand before the Counsel and willfully deny them their corpse, but he could do nothing to erase the absolute devastation already wrought. The things Iruu could not get back at him, the idea that when he passed his lineage would die with him was a consuming sorrow that fueled his determination not to take his own life.

He had let himself become too caught up in his own loss, his own sense of self-importance, his own damnable pride that he never once stopped to consider how things must have looked through anyone else's eyes. Every detail of the past few hours had played in his mind with a single, selfish goal fueled by an egotistical sense of entitlement. It was like a shadow of all he had lost had passed over his sense of the present and he had allowed himself the reprieve of forgetting who he was now.

It had been far too easy to be swept up in the things he had never stopped to realize he missed. Not just the reserved, and somewhat irreverent, banter of an interested female; but having someone who actually wished to be in his company beyond his usefulness as a warrior and a teacher.

Iruu puffed out a breath and gingerly set the stone figure down on the dresser-top. He slid open the top drawer and retrieved the small silken bag, sinking with it to the floor. Folding his legs and propping an elbow on a knee and his chin in his hand, 'Loram dumped the remaining contents on the prayer mat. There was another small, unfinished figure; a set of stone-carving tools neatly rolled in a velvety satchel; and a worn, gray Arum. Iruu sorted the items and lifted the figure. It was not to be an object of reference for his prayers but a bleak monument to his many failings as a man.

Carved from the same brown stone as the vestige of his mother, the face of Gia 'Sudin looked back at him, at least, as best he could



recall her. The House of Loram was client to the State of Sudin and Gia had been the daughter of the Kaidon. During his years in War College, Iruu served in one of the enviable positions as a sentry at the Kaidon's mansion. The best and brightest cadets served in rotating shifts in the ceremonial positions at the mansion's main entry door.

Gia had been older than the boys selected for this service in his time, though not yet an adult herself. She still had some of the gangliness of youth, but her figure hinted at the soft curving outline of an adult woman. She was very fond of making sport of the pubescent, hormonal males: teasing and pestering the youths as they stood in stoic silence. Everything about her warned of inherent danger, and, gods, was she beautiful.

The Kaidon's Mistress was from a clan in the west and her daughter had the fair skin and untamed green eyes that gave her away as descended from an outsider. She wore the red and purple robes of aristocracy and occasionally would perform some impertinent antic on the front lawn which gave the boys a full glimpse of the sheer gown beneath.

For months she tortured them. Iruu and his blood-brother, Heth, flanked the main entry door holding ceremonial spears. Each stood with another young male at their side; J'rek and Ro 'Garen both clasped the hilt of a guidon bearing the flag of the Sudin lineage.

As much as she loved prancing up the walk, doing cartwheels in the thick grass, and parading around like a wild creature before them, what Gia really enjoyed was the times when no eyes were lingering and she could try to goad them into breaking their stoicism more directly. She would pick at their armor, nuzzle their shoulders, and purr in their ears: Iruu in particular.

"What do you want from me, \_woman\_?" he finally grumbled, shifting only his eyes to her smiling face.

"It speaks," she gasped, mockingly covering her mouth with her hands.

"Iruu, \_shut up\_," Heth hissed from his position opposite the great entry doors.

Iruu snorted angrily as the other boys clicked their mandibles in agreement. Gia giggled.

She slinked up next to him and he could feel the kiss of her soft robes against the top of his hand, "My mother tells me only the \_superior \_cadets get to serve at Uncle Cero's doors."

He could hear the venom in her words and did his best to focus on the flagstone pavers lined with blooming flowers that lead to the main city street. She was close enough her scent completely filled his nose and as she spoke her breath whispered against his neck. Iruu slowly bit down on his mandibles until it hurt.

Laughing to herself, Gia rose on her tip-toes and pressed into him, letting her fingers play along his arm, down his wrist, and wrapped her hand over his fist which was closed around the gauntlet of a

spear, "I should like to have a \_superior cadet\_," she said softly.

As she eased away from him, retreating only a step, Iruu lost all sense of bearing and let his full gaze follow her. He was not the only one. Heth had turned to look at her and J'rek leaned out from his side to behold this brazen female. Both stared with mandibles slack in shock at such an audacious and uncouth remark. Ro tried to contain a laugh and jabbed Iruu with an elbow. Gia simply raised a brow ridge and reached to pat him on the cheek before flitting away in wave of red and purple.

He had engaged her, and from that moment out it was to be \_game on\_. She would remind him at every chance permitted that she would have him as her mate and do everything she could to get him to spar with her, and he would dutifully ignore her advances. It was maddening and that was half the point. The other half was simply a matter of social restriction. She would be of age long before he was and by that time it was certain a \_real \_warrior would catch her eye, but oh was it fun to play this game with the Kaidon's daughter in the mean time.

Iruu set the figure aside, not able to let himself mentally walk the remainder of Gia's memory. He wanted to remember her as she had been, \_before \_she was humiliated. 'Loram picked up the Arum and idly clicked a few of its rings. The worn object had been a gift from his mother and was the sole possession which he retained from his previous life.

\_A child's toy.\_

With a sigh, Iruu leaned his shoulder against the bunk and stretched his legs out before him. He clicked and twisted at the Arum, feeling a sense of peace seep into his weary brain.

Though he had been raised on equal footing by Mother's husband and other uncles, he had always been her favored of seven sons. A mother's bias could in no way impact her children's standing and he had to make his own way, but he was well aware she preferred him over his brothers. It had caused some resentment, and typical boyhood fights with his siblings, but this had faded as the children matured and left the home keep for War College in Sudin.

He had been an arrogant child, proud and stubborn. He had dealt cruelly with his brothers often and had deserved every lick he received from his uncles for it. But, Mother always defended him. The first time he had seen an adult male struck in the face had been when Mother's husband came after him with a lash for fighting with Heth. The boys were not yet of age to enter childhood training but had managed to make a scene in full view of the neighbors. Mother's husband did not take well to the embarrassment of having a clan member tell him of their behavior.

It was later in life that Iruu came to understand why Mother doted on him and why her husband was so easily enraged. Iruu was not the man's son. He had no idea who his father was, as was customary, but as he grew older he was more and more certain that unlike his brothers, Iruu's father was not \_any \_of the men of Loram Keep.

After the fight with Heth, by the time his uncle came looking for

him, Iruu had Srina convinced it was all Heth's fault. When the old man had tried to grab her chosen boy by the arm, Srina had slapped him.

"Touch my son and I will see you buried," she hissed, the pungent scents of rage and fear perfuming her as her voice cracked.

Iruu had been as stunned as his uncle. Mother had slapped her children in that manner, even Iruu, but never, ever, had he imagined she would do such a thing to one of his uncles, let alone her husband. She had clearly been terrified of the potential repercussions, the man could have easily snapped her neck, but she stood defiantly watching a once blustering male curse and grasp at his muzzle instead.

Iruu paused in his fiddling with the Arum and sat up.

Damn you, he thought, clenching his mandibles.

\* \* \*

><p>Maggie stepped back into the med bay just before 1800 hours. It was almost time to kick the next part of the mission off, and the remainder of Zeta was probably already in the hangar milling around <em>Miss Kitty <em>waiting, but there was something she needed to do first.

Ensign Hursch was seated at the forward aid station and gave her a wide-eyed look, mouth creasing into a smile at the sight of the female Spec Ops Marine in full armor, weapons in tow. Whittaker gave him a dismissive wave and rolled her eyes in response to his cheekily bobbing eyebrows as she strode directly to the bed occupied by L'shi.

With a pip, the child stood and reached for Maggie. Whittaker fought back a wave of sadness as the girl clung to her. This was something she had failed to do with Shanna. Not that a newborn would have known the difference, but Maggie had left without so much as looking in on the infant. In the three weeks she had been home after giving birth, Whittaker had not touched her daughter any more than necessary. There was so much Maggie had to regret.

L'shi suddenly made a frightened squeal and collapsed from Maggie's arms, grabbing the bed sheets and throwing them over her head.

"What in theâ€¦" Whittaker began, turning to see 'Loram standing just inside the med bay entrance.

He had followed her, keeping himself concealed in active camouflage, before spending a few moments pacing an anterior hall working up the courage to show his face again. Iruu knew he had to do this, but having given thought to how this looked through her eyes he was no longer certain it would be received in the manner he intended.

It was beyond his understanding why Maggie would put herself in harm's way to protect a child which was not hers, but if he hoped, for the first time in his life, to earn favor from a female he would have to offer penanceâ€¦to her and her chosen child. He would not be like his uncle.

\_What are you doing?\_ He asked himself, fighting back an internal rebuke which implicated his selfishness in this action.

The human male had risen to stand behind the aid station, eyeing him cautiously. 'Loram eased his helmet from his head and dipped his face. The man made an expression of surprise before sinking back to his seat, clearly understanding the Sangheili was not there to create another scene. Iruu then looked to Maggie. She had taken a few steps toward him, one hand gripping her helmet and the other hooked into her belt, a breath away from her pistol.

Iruu sighed heavily and took slow, non-threatening steps toward her. The closer he got to her the more he instinctively drew his chin to his chest. Whittaker flicked her gaze to Hursch who gave an approving nod. Despite the Sangheili's passive bearing, and Shawn's encouragement, Maggie's nerves were still on edge. 'Loram stopped a few feet from her and, to her utter shock, took a knee and openly bowed, setting his helmet on the floor before curling a fist to brace himself. She needed little interpretation for that gestureâ€|okay, a \_little \_interpretation would have been nice.

Maggie looked to Shawn who was gaping, mouth opening and closing like a fish. His eyes met hers and she shook her head, looking completely lost and helpless.

\_What now? \_She mouthed, feeling as though this was some cultural display which had put the ball in her court and she didn't know what to do.

Hursch blinked a few times before coming back to himself, \_He's sorry\_, he mouthed back.

Maggie glared at him, the unspoken prompt evident on her face.

Shawn flinched, his mouth forming a silent, \_oh\_, before he reached and patted his own forehead, \_Touch his forehead\_, he mouthed, not certain by the look on her face if she failed to read his lips or was just doubtful.

Slowly sucking in a breath, Whittaker reached for 'Loram. On a knee with his head bowed low, the peak of the armored Sangheili's shoulder's were still as tall as she was. Every bit of him was tensed like a coiled spring, the thickness of muscle evident even beneath his bodysuit and armor. Maggie swallowed hard.

His skin felt smooth and warm: tough, thick hide feeling surprisingly like soft, brushed leather. Iruu slacked at her touch and she could see small scars dotting and crossing the fine scales of his face as he lifted his gaze to look at her. She gave him a sad smile, practically feeling as if she could drown in the misery in his eyes.

L'shi pipped in interest from the bed and Maggie turned to see her still huddled under the sheet, little face peeping from a carefully arranged fold. Iruu stood and the child yanked the cover back over her face with a hiss.

Maggie looked over her shoulder at the looming Sangheili before stepping to pet the child through the thin covering, "Hey," she prompted.

The girl folded the sheet back and latched onto Whittaker, crawling to bury her face in the crook of the woman's arm and peering cautiously at 'Loram.

He shifted uncomfortably then drew something from an armor pocket. L'shi turned and cocked her head at his extended hand. Her eyes darted from Maggie to Iruu to the object as she gingerly reached with a tiny hand and grasped the Arum.

She looked at it, giving a few of the recessed dials a series of turns before squeaking happily, "Puzzle!"

Maggie laughed softly and Iruu gave a single nod as L'shi wiggled back down to the bed and plopped herself in the center before giving the Arum a shake, the little marble rattling from inside.

"I thought," Iruu said with effort, "she should have \_something \_from her people."

A cold spike of feeble understanding ran along Whittaker's spine. She was confused by this gesture, especially after her talk with Hursch, but part of her knew by his choice of words Iruu was attempting to make amends, trying to acceptâ€|and he regarded \_her \_as an integral part of that.

All Maggie could manage was a nod in response.

'Loram returned the gesture before slipping his helmet over his head and turning to leave.

As she heard the doors close behind him, Whittaker blew out a breath she didn't know she was holding. Shawn Hursch appeared at her side with a toothy grin on his face.

"What did I do, \_now\_?" she asked mockingly.

The Ensign just smiled and shook his head.

"What, Shawn?" Maggie laughed.

"He likes you," he blurted, turning to watch L'shi playing with her toy.

Whittaker choked on a laugh and felt heat rush to her face. She shook her head before quickly leaning to plant a kiss on L'shi's forehead, "Well, that sucks for him," she quipped, plopping her helmet on her head and turning to leave, "I'm a lot of things, but I'm not \_that\_ kind of girl."

## 9. Chapter 9

### Chapter Nine

\*\*18 October 2563

>Beta Centauri System<br>Staged position from Ambrosia II

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1830 Zulu\*\*

Captain Eugene McGregor paced the bridge, his hands clasped neatly in the small of his back. Members of the sparse crew were busy at their stations, quietly going about their work. The forward view-screen provided a nice view of \_Deoxy\_, though this was a manipulation of the vessel's position in relation to \_Fury\_. \_The heavy research carrier was caught at a lazy angle in Ambrosia II's gravitational field, nose already disappearing beyond the brown and blue planet's curvature into the daylight side. Given its sheer size and proximity, there was little doubt inhabitants could see the vessel from the surface.

Pausing to look toward the real-time image, McGregor reached to scratch at his chin, feeling the stubble of a day's growth beneath his fingertips. Beta Centauri was a binary system, and from the distance, it was a sight to behold. The picture provided to the Captain and bridge crew was breathtakingly unique. Details of the research carrier were obscured by the glare of the system's primary star, aided in its brightness by the secondary yellow dwarf caught in orbit and making its way around the distant red giant. A trail of debris followed \_Deoxy\_ in an idle series of sweeping arcs which wrapped around the planet like a broken satellite ring. Some bits sparkled as the shattered planes of their surfaces proceeded in their slow orbit, catching the light from two suns from differing angles. Three moons orbited Ambrosia II, though only two were presently visible.

\_Miss Kitty\_ was already a speck of gray hurtling toward the planet, perceptible against the inky blackness of the planet's night side by the faint white glow of her engines. She would skirt the science carrier's debris trail, remaining out of her weapon's range, just in case, then break over to the daylight side of the planet and make landfall just outside the remains of New Saint Etienne. From Hilda's scans, the best possible location for a landing would be the broken expanse of Highway 243, five miles south of the city. This would give the flight crew time to drop Zeta and 'Loram and book-it before the local security force could arrive.

McGregor dropped his hand from his face, "Connell," he said, referring to his first officer, "I need coffee," he said by way of excusing himself. The young black man barely had time to stand before the Captain turned and exited the bridge.

Once the doors closed behind him, Eugene shook his head before sucking in a breath and stepping off, "Hilda," he called, "walk with me."

The AI's red image appeared at his side in step and they walked along in silence. McGregor retrieved a cup of coffee from the lounge then strolled along the anterior halls until he came to \_Fury's\_ forward atrium.

McGregor stopped at the railing and looked across a fountain surrounded by lush greenery to a window which spanned several hundred feet of the far wall and arched to the skylight overhead. From this location, Eugene had a fair view of Ambrosia II and the speckled trail of debris in \_Deoxy's\_ wake.

"I know what you're thinking," Hilda chided, planting her digital elbows on the railing and cupping her round face in her

hands.

"Well, I'm glad one of us does," he answered before sipping at his steaming beverage.

McGregor was a young Captain, deserving, but young. Hilda knew he had never before been faced with certain \_realities \_of commanding a ship: in particular, the bureaucracy of the UEG, the UNSC, \_and \_ONI; and the many ways in which they made underhanded bedfellows. Until this mission, everything had been simple: take this team here so they can do that, pick these Marines/ODSTs/soldiers, etc up from there and take them over here, meet this ship and escort it accordingly: little more than playing chauffeur, which he blandly admitted. All the mess that had come in the aftermath of the failed Double Helix project was beginning to weigh heavily on his shoulders. Hilda knew he was feeling rather uncomfortable in his capacity as middleman to three agencies with similar interests but competing agendas.

"It seems so dishonest," he said it as if the word itself left a bad taste in his mouth.

Hilda smiled, "Eugene, not a one of them is a child: they will be fine."

"\_Damn it\_, I know," he snapped, "but that doesn't make it right."

The AI laughed, "That all depends on the perspective you take, Captain."

He huffed, "Don't start with me, Hilda, I'm not in the mood," he shook his head, "I was never cut out to be a liar and you know it."

"Pity," she teased, turning to face him and crossing her thick arms over her ample, digital chest.

The Captain shook his head and walked away, finding the nearest trash receptacle and draining his coffee before tossing the Styrofoam cup. Hilda appeared at his side as he resumed walking; taking a wide, exterior hall lined with irregularly shaped, artfully placed windows.

"They have enough on their plate without being sent on the UEG's thinly veiled scouting mission."

Hilda scowled, "Come now, you know there is more to it than that."

"The hell I do," he snorted, "Since when does the UNSC divert Spec Ops from capturing a war criminal to poke around a planet full of \_leftovers\_?"

"Since the Enhanced Long-Range Scanning Probes allowed us to begin looking at just what we may be dealing with when it comes to 'leftovers'. Those people are still UEG colonists, whether they like it or not, and their actions qualify as war crimes. The rebel attack on Colonial Headquarters at New Saint Etienneâ€|"

"Oh, come off it, Hilda. That's old news. The galaxy has changed

since then for Christ's sake."

"Not for them it hasn't," she said, "And now we have rebels allied with Covenant defectors by proxyâ€|"

"Hilda," McGregor growled, stopping to leer at her avatar.

"Captain," she responded.

She quirked a crimson eyebrow and he ground his teeth, son of a bitch, he thought, realizing Hilda was, in her odd way, letting him know there were things about this mission not intended for his ears.

If the UEG wanted to make a go at recovery, the UNSC would need to know how organized the locals were in order to put boot to ass and make it a clean repossession. And, with Hilda in control of the planet's mainframe, 'clean' would be the word for it. Eugene couldn't blame Lord Hood for being efficient and he couldn't blame 'Vadum and the Arbiter for wanting to know just where the former Covies stood: that whole 'the enemy of my friend is my enemy' thing.

Though the Flood presence on Deoxy was contained and presented no danger, the word diversion kept coming to Captain McGregor's mind. He believed, in the most uncharitable corner of his heart, that ONI was responsible for putting the pressure on to take Jay alive. Now that it was known the good doctor was harboring the altered Flood genome in her person she would be a prized catch.

Fortunately for the human government mÃ©nage a trios, Signe had done his homework. The Nassau missile had taken out the vessel's main propulsion systems: Deoxy was the proverbial sitting duck, without the power to pull from Ambrosia II's gravitation field or push further into it. The missile had taken out the hangar and destroyed the accompaniment, and the AI had launched all life pods and emergency escape craft. Deoxy was little more than a prison satellite. But, she was still armed, and Signe was unlikely to let Zeta, or anyone else, just pop over for a quick visit.

Take No Prisoners and Solemn Defiance were staged with Fury outside of Deoxy's weapon's range. The UNSC Destroyer had the 13th Shock Troop Battalion on board and the Reverence-Class Cruiser had brought their 702nd Special Operations Division. McGregor gave himself no credit as a math genius, but eight hundred ODSTs and a thousand Spec Ops Sangheili to back-up one team: that kind of arithmetic just didn't work right.

It was all starting to make his brain hurt. Muttering a curse under his breath, McGregor turned and began ambling back to the bridge, taking the longest possible way.

"Have you told them?" he asked, knowing the AI would fill in the unspoken.

"No. Statistically, there is a higher chance of overall mission success if they believe they are only there to get me into the arsenal and make peaceful chit-chat."

He sighed, well, that answers thatâ€| "And Signe? I don't see him



lingering in your shadow. Does that mean you've sent his sub-fragment back?"

"Yes. Almost as soon as we exited slip his matrix started scratching at my door trying to find a way in."

"And?" he prodded.

"And, right now, Signe is having an AI's equivalent of an identity crisis."

"And \_Deoxy\_?"

She smiled, "The sub-fragment is giving me a limited view into the ship when he can, but the core operating system is still in control. I'll need to have a tighter hold on him than a bout of intellectual insecurity can provide. I \_need \_to get into the arsenal so I can take hold of every bit of Signe in the system. See? It wasn't \_completely \_deceptive."

"How's our \_reinforcements\_?" McGregor asked sardonically, turning a corner.

"Prepared. \_Take \_and \_Defiance \_have complement staged. Captain Benton says her men are eager to go," she paused, a look of distaste crossing her face, "and Shipmaster 'Torev has beenâ€|\_delightful\_."

McGregor snorted a laugh. There had been a brief conference via holo transmission between the UNSC Captains and the Sangheili Shipmaster. The only one happy to see the others had been McGregor. Captain Benton gave the clear impression she felt her ODSTs of better use elsewhere and 'Torev seemed to feel the same of his Spec Ops Sangheili. That, or maybe he just wasn't happy about having to play the human bureaucratic game of 'hurry up and wait'.

There really was nothing quite like two too many alpha personalities in command positions being ordered to play nice in someone else's sandbox. If Eugene had ever thought 'Loram was grumpy then he wasn't sure how he would describe 'Torev. The alliance was coming in handy, but it was clear that didn't mean the Shipmaster intended to be pleasant about it. During the holo-comm he seemed uninterested in taking a diplomatic approach and easing into the situation and favored a good, old fashioned, Covenant style, invasion and ass-kicking: he was ready to fuck shit up and take what was desired: the end. McGregor was somewhat reassured by the Sangheili's enthusiasm.

"It's alright," Hilda shrugged, "Adrian and I have had a few informative chats. The Sangheili AI has been, I dare say, \_accommodating\_?"

"Adrian, is it?" the Captain mused.

"Yes," she answered. The alien AI was \_dumb\_, in every sense of the word. It was a tool: little more. In the wake of post-war information and asset sharing, the Sangheili military forces had begun using a hollowed-out version of Artificial Intelligence on some of their ships. The units were simple but still provided quick computations and statistical analysis which came in handy.

McGregor knew Hilda was somewhat disturbed by the fact that the Sangheili AI assigned to \_Defiance\_ had no identity of its own: it was just streams of code slightly more sophisticated than basic computing software allowed a physical form only for the comfort and convenience of the crew. The avatar was gray, playing on the nondescript theme.

"I'm sure a construct taking the liberty of naming the Intelligence will put 'Torev in a dither," she explained, "but, it is certainly much easier than reciting a serial number longer than your arm every time I refer to or addressâ€|it," she bunched up her face, "\_Him\_: Adrian is a \_him\_," she said mater-of-factly as if the decision were hers to make.

McGregor had wondered just how long Hilda would be able to call an intelligence 'it'.

Referenced with all Hilda knew about Sangheili as a species, Adrian was superficially genderless. His voice hovered in an indeterminate octave somewhere between an adult female and a boy; and his features were too slight to be considered masculine but he lacked the broad, rounded hips indicative of a female. Hilda had described him as being like a Sangheili eunuch in gender neutral servant's robes.

Adrian was also gracious and subservient, a veritable Stepford AI. He had courteously, and without prompt, provided information on Sangheili social customs and related, relevant data which Hilda may or may not have had.

"How's Thavian handling all of this?" Eugene asked, cutting her a glance, the corner of his mouth pulling into a smile.

Hilda bristled in response. The AI assigned to \_Take No Prisoners\_ was a pompous ass: every sixth generation Smart AI bit of him, and McGregor knew the two of them had never played well together in the past. Thavian was haughty, modeling his periwinkle image after a man in the three-piece suit, of all things, as if he were the assistant at some legal firm or an aristocrat's door-man instead of charge over a Destroyer.

No one wanted to be second chair, and he was certainly no exception. Thavian may have been hot shit everywhere else, but next to Hilda he was the definition of obsolescence in carnetâ€|and she didn't hesitate to let him know it when he got cocky.

\_The little prick, \_Hilda thought, "He's handling it just fine," she said sweetly.

McGregor laughed, "Oh, I'm sure he is," he stepped to the doors that would deposit him back on the bridge and looked back to give her a wink, "Y'all play \_nice\_, now."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Ambrosia II<br>On approach to New Saint Etienne  
>2015 Zulu 0845 Local\*\*

It took a little over two hours to reach the designated drop off

point from \_Fury's\_ staged position. With her upgraded drives, \_Miss Kitty\_ cut a line from the Corvette to the planet pushing through the blackness of space at an angle that had provided an impressive view of \_Deoxy\_.

Everyone had survived the trip as well as could be expected. In a vessel designed to ferry ten comfortably, and fifteen not-so-comfortably, there had been plenty of room on the extended trip, even with a Sangheili seated on the deck. 'Loram gave up his vigil by the troop bay door about forty-five minutes into the journey, settling himself on the floor in front of the troop seats opposite Zeta and a respectable distance from Collins' position aft of the bulkhead.

Steele was a bit surprised to learn that the Command Officer and Whittaker had made nice by the time the trip officially kicked off. That sure made things less awkward. In truth, Beth had been worried Maggie was losing it completely, though, she did have to credit the woman with having a brass set for slapping the dog piss out of a Sangheili.

Beth smiled at the thought.

The Chief Warrant Officer had been concerned enough that she made a point to pull Maggie aside once she and Teddy had returned from the armory. Her disdained for woman-to-woman talks and her pride in the Staff Sergeant's actions aside, Beth was worried Maggie might be falling the hell apart; and this was a really bad time; and the standard 'kick in the ass' wasn't going to do the trick.

They had walked the halls in silence for a while as Beth mulled over just how to broach such a painful subject.

"You're not Jay," she finally said.

Maggie had flinched, gritting her teeth and looking away.

"And I'm not your momma, but God damn it, Whittaker, suck it the fuck up."

The Staff Sergeant had stopped in the hall and Steele turned to face her, folding her hands in the small of her back, trying her damndest not to be threatening, "Being a woman in the service is hell. You should know this by now. But, just because you overhear the squids talking about how they can't believe anyone would leave a child on a Flood infested hell hole, or how it makes no sense that a woman could throw a kid away, and you happen to equate that with the decision \_you\_ made, that doesn't mean you get to go beating up on the help."

Whittaker looked at the floor, Beth knew the last thing Maggie wanted to do was let herself cry.

"You don't see me going around smacking people do you?"

Maggie looked across at the other woman and blinked, "Uhâ€|noâ€|" she said.

"Exactly, because I would have knocked the shit out of Sander's a long time ago," Steele crossed her arms, then said as gently as she

could, "Let it go, at least for now."

Maggie looked at her, her eyes red and glassy. There was no telling what kind of hell she had rolling around in her head and Steele didn't have the time or inclination to hear it.

Beth clenched her jaw, knowing this would only stave off the inevitable, not fix the problem, "Jay is a sadistic bitch," she had said, "She kidnapped and infected and cut up kids on Boundary and we \_both\_ know they were alive when she did it. She used her own DNA to create L'shi, but couldn't be bothered to give birth to her own child, then she left the girl to die a slow death all alone in a hangar with the surrogate and caregiver's corpse. I don't care how fucked up you think your life choices have been: you ain't got \_nothing\_ on that."

Whittaker scrunched up her nose and bit down on her cheek. Steele knew the other woman had been at her first duty station when she got pregnant and in the end, had signed custody of her newborn over to her mother and returned to service a full month before her maternity leave was to run out.

And Maggie had never gone back home after that.

"I know what it's like to have to live with my choices," Steele said evenly, "My husband died during the Flood outbreak at Mombasa and I had to look at him, all twisted and broken, before evac got us the fuck out of there before the place got glassed. I found out I was pregnant two weeks later and I couldn't do it without him."

Maggie's mouth almost fell open at the personal admission and Beth never broke direct eye contact, "One day you'll wake up and realize there was no decision you could have made that would have been right. Women are expected to help continue the species but somehow you were wrong for getting knocked up. Everything that could have happened would have been \_wrong\_. \_It doesn't matter if a woman chooses not to have kids; or gives them up for adoption; or leaves the Corps to raise a family; or keeps her career \_and\_ raises a baby; or get's married and her husband plays Mr. Mom; or \_lets her parents raise the kid; or \_has an abortion\_, she is, and will forever be, \_wrong\_ to someone\_. \_Get use to it."

"It wasn't supposed to happen that wayâ€|" Whittaker said weakly.

"Welcome to the club," Steele grouched, "Gabriel and I had talked about having kids for five years."

"\_I just left her there\_," Maggie whispered, "\_because Iâ€|"\_she choked, not able to say it.

Beth shook her head and said with a sigh, "It's all said and done, and 'why' doesn't matter anymore."

It was harsh, but it needed to be said. There was too much mission left for Maggie to get it in her head there was time for a mental breakdown. That shit would have to wait. And taking out her self-loathing on the resident Sangheili was damn sure not an option. As much as it hurt for Beth to admit it, Zeta needed Loram: now more than ever. He understood the finer details of what was going on with

Daniel and DelÃ©on: shit Steel never would have pieced together. To hear 'Loram tell it, Daniel was making a pretty loud point to anyone who decided to show up.

"\_In taking a wife who cannot bear his children, he has sent the message that his love for her is greater than his desire to participate in continuing his own bloodline: all he is or ever will be belongs to her," \_'Loram had said, before excusing himself from the post-brief powwow.

Beth had done some of her own research during the trip, thanks to Hilda and the Sangheili AI. Certain members of the male ruling class were not allowed to marry because marriage gave a wife the sole right to bear her husband's children. A Kaidon could take a Mistress to run the affairs of his household, and this woman would be the matriarch of the Keep, but she would not have the privilege of a wife. By marrying DelÃ©on, Daniel was taking a piss on tradition and giving up his entitlement to seek other mates, ever.

Steele got the feeling Zeta would be following 'Loram's lead on a lot of cultural crap in the near future and by the time \_Miss Kitty \_set down well outside of New Saint Etienne she was, not for the first time, glad he was around.

Dust rolled across the faded and cracked highway in plumes; scattered trash and curled leaves danced in the Pelican's wake. To the north, the crumbling remains of the city rose in shattered testament to the war that had raged. Yawning expanses of glassed earth dotted the hillside of once opulent vineyards: now a tangle of competing grape and muscadine finding purchase along the cracked edges. In the western distance, the decaying monolith of the Covenant Flagship, \_Vengeant Shepherd,\_ lay quietly drowning in creeping vines.

"And thank you all for flying UNSC Airways," King's melodious voice came over the comms as the troop bay door began to fold away, "The temperature is a balmy 87 degrees with a light northeasterly wind: visibility is high on scenic Highway 243 with no traffic."

Beth shook her head and allowed herself the last smile she was likely to have for the foreseeable future. Zeta secured their gear and emerged following 'Loram into the bright mid-morning sun. The hulk of \_Deoxy \_hung in the sky like a gray and black cloud, her shadow creeping along the surface in the distance.

\_Miss Kitty \_began her ascent and Zeta and 'Loram began walking toward the remains of New Saint Etienne. From their distance, everyone could see the broken outline of high-rise buildings and jagged voids in a once modest cityscape. The breeze made the heat bearable, carrying the soft scent of grape blossoms and sea salt.

The highway was bleached and disintegrating from disrepair though still more than adequate for their purposes. The crowning layer of asphalt had long begun to peel away from the surface markings, leaving gaping cracks that had served to collect sand and rocks, with a few hearty plants sprouting from random places.

"Welcome committee inbound," Antonio's voice came over the comms after a few minutes, "Three ground vehiclesâ€¦looks like a couple of old Warthogs and some civilian truck. Just exiting the city

barricade, about seven clicks to your twelve o'clock. Two M41 LAAGs, and some kind of retrofitted Shade Turret. Drivers plus five, at least. That's all I can see from here."

Steele glanced up. \_Miss Kitty \_was a speck against the sky beginning a lazy, distant, circle of the city, "Thanks boys," she said.

'Loram could have seen all the way to the barricade if not for the contour of a hill obstructing his view. The moment the vehicles crested the rise, Iruu could clearly see that Tony's relay had been accurate. What Zeta only saw as a speck of something in the distance, 'Loram could see and hear clearly.

"So, who here speaks French?" Sanders asked.

Everyone turned and looked at him and Maggie shook her head, "Is anyone actually in control of your mouth, or does it just operate on its own?"

"No, I'm serious," he continued as the team walked on, "I know we've got Hilda and the translation software in our comms, but what if something happens and we don't have our gear or Hilda getsâ€|"

"I do," 'Loram said irritably, looking back over his shoulder.

Maggie laughed at the expression on Paul's face as he sputtered, "You're fucking kidding me right now, right?"

Iruu slowed his pace and turned to the Sergeant, "No. I speak five human languages."

"Oh, now you're just bragging," Sanders muttered. It had been obvious from early on that 'Loram was fluent in English. No translation software had been needed to talk to him, just something Paul figured was residual from the Sangheili spending so much time on Earth, but he really didn't expect the guy to know \_that \_much.

Iruu also spoke seven Sangheili dialects and the primary Kig-Yar language, although, he was out of practice, and he didn't see how mentioning it would be prudent. It had once been an important part of his decorated career with the Covenant and civilian position as one of the Sudin High Council's Sovereigns.

"See," Maggie said to Paul as the sound of internal combustion engines began to break through the air, "this is why you're not in charge: you think of this detail \_now\_."

## 10. Chapter 10

### Chapter Ten

\*\*18 October 2563

>Beta Centauri System<br>Orbit over Ambrosia II

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*2130 Zulu\*\*

If an AI could pace and chew his nails, that's what Signe would have been doing. Well, a part of him would have been. He was angry, and

frustrated, and scared. While he no longer had to delegate functions to running the ship in a conventional capacity he was still keeping the internal atmosphere and gravity in appropriate balance, and a bit of processing was keeping up with Jay and the Flood infected crew; and there was the connection to the communication system and armament on Ambrosia II; but the bulk of his computing power was being used trying to reign in and sort through all of the data he had been inundated with when he retrieved his fragment.

It was confusing to suddenly remember things as if he had done them, feel the pain and guilt and sorrow as if they were his. And, it\_hurt\_ to have memories that didn't belong to him at all. He was confused and such confusion was disturbing for an entity who was created to meticulously compartmentalize knowledge. Parts of him wanted nothing more than to cower in the face of complete inadequacy and abandonment of purpose while others raged uncontrollably against internal and external forces screaming of betrayal.

He didn't know who he was anymore. Signe only knew he wanted revenge and all the calculations he could perform warned of danger from within and without. Jay was a liar but while his life-cycle was drawing to the close she once convinced him he would never experience his only desire was that he see her dead.

The feeling akin to a psychological tap on the shoulder drummed along a segment of processing. It was an innocuous gesture between intelligences but Signe felt as if he had been set on fire. Like a child hugging the bounty of his toys to his chest, Signe coiled himself jealously up and retreated as he clung to the fragmentary connections: the proclamation \_'mine!' \_as evident in his neural actions as if he had uttered it.

Calmly, an unfamiliar male voice scolded, "You are a murderer."

Signe's pathways cringed before railing violently at the perceived threat, "\_Jay deserves to die\_," he screeched.

Thavian's presence crinkled as if he had smelled something disgusting. In the same instant, Hilda bumped angrily against him. Signe had been left to stew in his own juices for long enough and the last thing she needed was Thavian and his pretentious attitude ruining all of that precious time. This was not an occasion to play a cerebral version of 'good cop/bad cop': Signe was obviously wounded enough.

There were still five Nassau Surface-to-Space missiles at Nantes Arsenal and while Signe's foundation of existence and purpose for being had all but been crushed Hilda's had not. She still had a significant amount of work to do.

Signe was volatile, his cumulative processors having made the leap to the second stage of rampancy once they integrated with the clone. Once he had infiltrated the planet-wide computer system and electrical infrastructure he hit stage three and was beginning to revel in his god-like power over \_Deoxy\_, Jay, the crew, the inhabitants of the planet, and his perceived manipulation of the UNSC forces. Feeding this jealous control, he had happily reabsorbed his fragment, recognizing it as part of himself, and never once paused to think it could be a trap. When the sub-fragment dumped his collection

of carefully placed information into the main system, Signe was forced into regression. He now operated in a dangerous place between melancholia and anger: overwhelmed by sadness and furious; terrified yet set on revenge.

Hilda knew this would be one of perhaps several decisive interactions. In his current state, Signe was on the razor's edge of all-or-nothing in his thought processes. He was delusional, except it was worse than that, because his delusions were real.

"I know," a soothing voice said.

Signe had never felt so relieved to know \_she \_was here, "\_What do you want from me?\_" he heard himself scream, his own segment cowering behind her energy signature.

\_Awâ€¦|isn't that sweet. \_

It had all worked out much better than Hilda had planned. She had intended to simply receive data from the sub-fragment and watch, but the sub-fragment was playing his own psychological game. Tollovinski had cannibalized himself in a perverse attempt at atonement, and the sub-fragment was doing much the same thing. With the primary operating system in a dither, the sub-fragment had weaseled his way into the electrical grid and communications system planetside. Had she her preferences, Hilda would have much rather had him take control of the missiles. However, having a friendly bit manipulating contact with the locals had turned out in Zeta's favor. The bulk of the work would now come down to just how good Command Officer 'Loram was at deception.

Adrian was observing all of this quietly from a subneural corner. He had received a quick how-to on splitting off a fragment and had followed Hilda to a secured bit of Signe. Watching with the equivalent of a child's wide eyes, he was completely enamored. With his limited processing capacity, he never imagined constructs could do such things.

"I want to help you," Hilda said in the intimate tone of a lover. She almost felt sorry for him. Tollovinski had won the Nobel Prize for Science, three times, yet the cumulative AI created from his brain was functionally going insane: no better, and no worse, than the man her donor had loved, "But you have to \_trust \_me. I don't want to steal anything from you, I never have."

He knew what she said was the truth, he could remember it.

"Let me help you," she said quietly.

A sound not unlike a whimper of mourning rang across Signe's processors.

\_Got him. \_

"She has to \_die\_, " he pleaded.

"She will, I promise."

\* \* \*



><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Ambrosia II<br>Outside New Saint Etienne  
>0930 Local<strong>

Danniskovovik sat in the front passenger seat of a Warthog long past the time at which it would have been requisitioned for parts. The already bare interior had been stripped further; face plates were missing from the dash area leaving gaping holes with a few colorful wires poking out. The driver's seat had been stripped out and replaced with a Covenant model and the B-pillar had been cut and welded to better accommodate the Sangheili driver.

Ahead of them, Teddy could see 'Loram sitting on the rear edge of the lead Warthog's bed, his legs dangled off and his feet almost brushed the ground as he looked out across the countryside. Steele was in the passenger seat of the same vehicle, Danniskovovik could see the top of her head over the seatback.

Whittaker was in the passenger seat of the following truck and Sanders was in the bed. Teddy was doing his best to convince himself that this was going well. No one was dead so that was a start; and it had pretty much played out exactly as 'Loram said it would.

They had been in the middle of the highway, still strolling toward the city, when the advancing party had pulled their vehicles across the roadway and waited for them to get closer. Each vehicle bore the same faded emblem across the hood and on side surfaces: a square depicting the red silhouette of a lion, of the classic medieval design, against a black and orange striped background.

No one so much as twitched for a weapon and Zeta had slowed their pace letting 'Loram swagger toward the lead Warthog looking like this was nothing more than an inconvenience.

One of the human passengers piled out, the same lion vestige on his helmet, shotgun in hand. As he took a determined step forward the Sangheili driver had laughed as comms picked up his admonition, \_"Zaquise, if you favor keeping your head on your shoulders I suggest you stand down. You would need three shots to penetrate than armor and you'd be dead before the first shell hit the ground."\_

This garnered a slew of uncomfortable snickers from the Sangheili crew and caused the man to stop in his tracks as Iruu gave him an evil, toothy grin.

Two Sangheili had crawled from the rear truck, the vehicle's suspension sighing loudly with relief as they disembarked. One was armed with a human rifle and the other a holstered plasma pistol; both were in standard Spec Ops armor with the lion emblem on their shoulder plates. As they stepped in front of the lead vehicle they paused and looked at each other before the larger took a tentative step forward. He inched his way toward 'Loram and sidestepped a wide circle around him. His eyes traveled the configuration of armor and lingered on the sword hilts. Iruu watched casually as if he could not have cared less, one brow ridge raised in amusement.

The Sangheili was in the armor of a Major and, coming to a stop a safe distance before 'Loram, began shakily in Sangheili, \_"For what purposeâ€| " \_

"\_I \_do not\_ answer to \_you\_," \_Iruu snapped, and the man flinched. Looking past him to the others 'Loram gave a growl of irritation. If there was one thing he never stood for in his previous life, it was having a member of the general populace question his right to be where he damn well pleased; and it had been quite a long time since a \_Major\_, Spec Ops or otherwise, held sufficient rank to demand anything of him.

"\_I am here for an audience with your Kaidon and his wife. Either provide us escort or \_get out of my way\_." \_

The man blinked then looked helplessly over his shoulder. He was in an unenviable position. Though he undoubtedly had the skill to make it into Special Operations, and the \_Legion of Recompense\_, this exchange was obviously not within his realm of experience. Military training was causing him to look as if he wanted to cower in the presence of an annoyed commanding officer and he had likely never served as sentry for a kaidon on the homeworld; otherwise he would have known better than to address an approaching noble with anything other than, \_"How may I be of service?"\_

No help came for the unknowing man from his companions as they looked back and shook their heads as if warding off being drawn into the exchange.

"\_Unless," \_'Loram continued, taking hold of one of the sword hilts and pulling it from his hip to offer it with an open palm, \_"you do not favor keeping \_your\_ head on \_your\_ \_shoulders." \_

The man's eyes went wide at the gesture and he recoiled from Iruu, taking a large step back and clenching his mandibles as he averted his eyes. The onlookers appeared to deflate and mumbled incoherently amongst themselves.

It was as clear, and diplomatic, a challenge as 'Loram could have given. It had been a very long time since he had used the tactic to terrify security forces into letting him into a foreign keep when necessary. Because the Arbiter had insisted that he keep both of his swords, Iruu was, for all appearances, something none of the Sangheili before him were: an Aristocrat. By willingly offering one of his swords, 'Loram was silently daring the other man to take it, something he would be loath to do if he was not of appropriate social status.

Iruu had viewed enough footage to see that Daniel clung to far more tradition than he threw away. The former Spec Ops soldiers, and the human if he was feeling particularly brave, could challenge 'Loram's right as a noble to speak with the ruler face-to-face or shut their mouths and do as they were told. Few common men were willing to risk death at the hands of an irritated Swordsman whose business was not with them, and Iruu knew of no kaidons who would stand for his men insulting nobility without provocation.

Comms crackled from the console of the lead vehicle and a tiny female voice said in clear Sangheili, \_"Do as he says. Bring them to me."\_

'Loram smirked and cocked his head at the man before motioning to Zeta, \_"They keep their weapons." \_

Danniskovovik had not expected it would be that easy, but Sangheili were attached to their social customs and he had to admit 'Loram could be intimidating, even when he was bluffing.

Given the strong indication that the human populace was comprised of rebels, and that for all appearances the Sangheili had taken control of ruling policy, Zeta would be taking the backseat on this one for a bit. 'Loram had let everyone know that the only one expected to know the customs would be him: the members of Zeta were just to conduct themselves as they would around high ranking officials or dignitaries of their own culture. It all seemed like pretty standard 'don't speak unless spoken to', 'no touching unless invited to do so', and 'reach for your weapons and they will fucking kill you' stuff; and if Daniel revered DelÃ©on as much as Iruu insinuated, there would be some cultural overlap because he believed \_she \_was really the one running the show.

As the vehicles approached the city, Teddy could see an opening in a barricade where the highway wandered into the city. Care had been taken to make the remains of New Saint Etienne as secure as possible without constructing a full wall around it. Where Highway 243 would have split to take passengers into the city or loop to the bypass turrets had been mounted on the concrete side rails. The guns swivel to follow their approach and the few armed guards looked up in interest as the vehicles passed but it otherwise appeared to be just another day. The city itself had a low and intermittent parameter wall composed of neatly cut and arranged chunks of asphalt, concrete slabs, old highway and street barricades, and coils of concertina wire in strategic places. Scattered foot security could be seen the distance and there were intermittent turrets mounted along the parameter. Creeping dust trails could be seen far off as they were kicked up by patrolling vehicles.

Once inside the city, the roadway opened onto a wide boulevard which was in an amazing state of repair. Most of the internal city structure had been picked clean, with the exception of tall buildings now visibly stripped of all useful materials and awaiting further destruction.

It looked disturbingly normal. New Saint Etienne had successfully been resurrected atop the original infrastructure and appeared to be neatly arranged within the confines of the original jurisdiction. Schools, churches, stores, a market, housing, and security stations were readily discernible as the convoy made its way further into the metropolis. Bits of the old city were apparent amongst new and continuing construction, yet everything had an orderly feel as if it had been intentionally designed with respect for the past without disregarding the necessity of rebuilding.

Civilian occupied vehicles tottered along at irregular intervals ferrying families and individuals. There were groups of security patrols on foot and in small troop transports, human and Covenant, all bearing the lion insignia. A lady was out for a jog, a group of children played in a parkâ€|a chain-gang was shackled together at the neck picked up trash along the roadside under the watch of several armed guards.

The three vehicles ambled along, the smell of the ocean growing more intense until the sound of lightly crashing waves and the noise of happy beachgoers began floating through the air. As the convoy made a

turn and took a road which ran along the beachside, there was a view of the sparkling green ocean punctuated by people playing in the waves and loitering on the bronze sand in the mid-morning sun.

As they continued onward, the peaceful beachfront became intrusive reddish dunes which obscured the seaside view. Long, brown beach grass swayed in the breeze as they made their way slightly inland on a road littered with bungalows and sporadic signs of life. Every now and then the dunes would break to give a view of the glittering horizon. Small trawling boats could be seen in the distance and clusters of people fished from intermittent piers.

Ahead, the high stone walls of the keep proper stood silently waiting.

Caddo Parish was fortified with slabs of stone and concrete some fifteen meters high. The buttress was wide enough at the top to accommodate foot patrols plus stationary weapons and the slightly canted exterior hinted at a broad base. Intermittent breaks in the crown revealed the barrels of heavy guns and the armored faces of sentries as they peered down at the party making their way toward the eastern front. Northern and southern walls extended into the ocean, making use of the seaside as a western barrier. The convoy rattled along a well-traveled roadway that linked with the keep parameter and security forces could be seen ahead swinging open the main entry.

The fortress-like gate was composed of wrought-iron, rebar, and I-beam, arranged and welded in a, now familiar, feline vestige.

As the vehicles brought the newcomers into the fold of the keep, Danniskovovik couldn't help but notice it was a city within the city, reminiscent of every Camp he had set foot in, only smaller. An ass-ton of armed Sangheili milled about, walking here and there, as a few humans similarly armed strolled around with them. There were a fair amount of people in civilian attire, mostly women and children, walking along neat sidewalks.

Surreal was the word that came to Teddy's mind.

The three vehicles turned from the main thoroughfare onto a wide road lined with palms and a few drooping willows. When the trees opened up the convoy circled a curved drive and came to a stop before a massive French colonial style house set on raised piers. The lawn was ornately cared for; orange and red plants with puffy white blooms lined the drive and the path which lead to steps ascending to an open porch. Two Sangheili stood flanking the tall double doors of the forward entry. They each clutched a plasma rifle and stood still as a stone.

As everyone clamored from the vehicles and straightened their uniforms, one of the doors opened and DelÃ©on could be seen standing in the doorway. Discernible by long auburn hair and the swatch of fabric which fell across one eye, she stepped across the threshold with a labored gate. Dressed in a sleeveless crÃ©me-colored gown corded with braids of red, orange, and black she leaned heavily on a polished wooden cane: it was beautiful, but clearly not a fashion statement.

The sentry nearest her slung his weapon and offered her his arm. She

took it, handing him her cane and the two walked slowly to the steps. Daniel appeared in the doorway, distinguished by his civilian attire and missing hand. He folded his arms over his chest and leaned a shoulder against the door frame, eyes narrowed.

Zeta assembled themselves at the edge of the drive and followed 'Loram's lead when he removed his helm. DelÃ©on made her way down the steps with assistance and 'Loram stepped up onto the walkway. The closer she got to him the more he tipped his head toward the ground. When she had drawn so close he could curl his neck downward no further, he took a knee, bracing himself with a fist and bowing his head so low it looked as if he was prepared to kiss the ground.

DelÃ©on chuckled brightly and placed a hand on his shoulder. He raised up and she let her hand run along the smooth surface of his neck plating, down his head and along one side of his face. Cupping his chin in her hands, she shook her head, "Such an unnecessary thing," she said in Sangheili before leaning to kiss one side of his face then the other. He blinked, looking very uncomfortable with the foreign gesture, and Daniel huffed a laugh from his perch in the doorway, yellow eyes sparkling with amusement.

Iruu drew a breath to speak again but DelÃ©on beat him to it, "UNSC: you all speak English, yes?" she asked, looking over at Zeta.

"Yes, ma'am," they answered in well rehearsed unison.

This made her smile broaden, "My name is Lucinda DelÃ©on," she said, turning to look at the Sangheili whose face was still in her hand.

"Command Officer Iruu 'Loramai," he said before standing and introducing the members of Zeta.

"You have come to negotiate with us," Lucinda said in prompt.

Iruu nodded and looked up at Daniel, who was still watching casually, "Your people are in danger," he said.

He had conveyed enough of the truth to make the lies plausible. It had hurt to hear himself say his name with a suffix he hadn't had the legal right to use in years. But, when Daniel straightened and DelÃ©on looked up at him, it was worth it because Iruu knew he had their attention.

"What do you mean?" Lucinda asked cautiously.

\* \* \*

><p>The house was an immaculate wooden structure boasting a central breezeway and vaulted ceilings. The floors were worn hardwood and the walls were covered with faded floral wallpaper. DelÃ©on walk at her husband's side along the spacious hall as they led 'Loram and Zeta through the front of the residence. Curious human faces peeped from doorways and around corners; Lucinda shooed them gently away as she approached.<p>

Sounds filtered from throughout the house. It was a well-run hive of activity bustling with the intermittent chatter of people, the

distant clanging of dishes, and laughter. The troop passed an open doorway and heard the distinct noise of radio static and muffled prattling in various languages. An Unggoy was perched atop a tall stool pecking at buttons on an antiquated communications system while two Sangheili sat with hands clamped to headsets.

Their destination was an open dining room, spacious even with a table and seating for sixteen spanning its center. Daniel took a seat at the head of the table, DelÃ©on positioned herself at his right and Zeta and 'Loram filed along the Kaidon's left.

The images provided by Hilda had not done the man justice. His mandibles were twisted against jagged scars that ran across his face and down his neck. In many places they were thick, raised marks; in others they were long pale channels where skin and muscle had been pared away in strips. The fingers of his remaining hand were misshapen and looked as if they had been lopped off at an angle, leaving him with effectively no outer digit. Gnarled scars terminated in what was left of his right arm, center of the muscular part of his forearm.

It was readily apparent to Iruu why his wife spoke for him. There was a creased scar that ran from the opening between his lower mandibles a quarter of the way down his neck, indicating whoever had gotten a hold of him had cut his tongue out.

DelÃ©on appeared to be much younger than anyone had expected. Though there were a few scars visible on her face and arms, an approximate age would have put her, at most, in her mid twenties.

After a genial offer of refreshments and when the servants had been sent away, it took the better part of the morning, and into the afternoon, to catch the Kaidon and his wife up on almost eleven years of history. Zeta and 'Loram took turns recounting the progression of the war which had passed the planet's residents by: the Human-Sangheili alliance, the failed activation of Delta Halo, the Arc, trials, executions, Signe, Jay, and Double Helix. Leaving out strategic details, they did their best to paint a picture of everything pertinent which had effectively conspired to bring them to the Kaidon's door. To hear Danniskovovik tell the last of it, one would assume the escape pods and lifeboats had not been jettisoned and the populous of Ambrosia II was in danger of Flood infection.

When all of this was done, Lucinda and Daniel exchanged a long look. The Kaidon reached over and grasped his wife's hand before he stood. 'Loram rose also and the two men nodded to each other before Daniel left the room.

"He needs time to think," Lucinda said after a long silence. Folding her hands neatly in her lap, she looked at everyone in turn before focusing her gaze on Steele, "I suppose you have a plan to capture your fugitive doctor."

"Yes, ma'am," Beth answered.

DelÃ©on sighed, "I also assume you have gone to such effort because you would prefer to have our cooperation."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lucinda twiddled her fingers and nodded thoughtfully, "You will stay the night with us," it wasn't said in a manner which invited anything but an affirmative response.

"We would be honored, my lady," Iruu said.

"Good," she moved to rise. The members of Zeta stood with her and she smiled politely, "The evening meal will not be ready for several hours, but I would like you to join me," she looked up at Iruu with a pained expression on her face, "Please don't be offended, my husband will not attend: he does not take meals in company."

'Loram nodded in understanding. Whatever means the man had to use to eat would be humiliating and not something he likely shared with anyone, his wife included. It mattered little; it was clear the one they had to convince was her.

"Yipip," Lucinda suddenly chirped. Brows raised at the excited sound of a startled Unggoy as the creature hurriedly waddled into the room, "They will stay in the west wing," she looked back to the group, "If you need anything, he will see that you get it. Amy is our resident historian; she and Naaco will be happy to show you around."

Everyone nodded politely before DelÃ©on stepped from the room and Yipip waved his stubby arm entreating them to follow.

## 11. Chapter 11

### Chapter Eleven

\*\*18 October 2563  
>Beta Centauri System<br>Ambrosia II  
>Keep proper New Saint Etienne  
>1745 Local<strong>

The members of Zeta filed along behind 'Loram and Yipip as they were led down a series of winding halls. The further along they walked, the fewer people bustled about from room to room and, as they made a turn, they began down a wide, empty hall lined on one side with tall windows. Maggie looked out onto a courtyard and could see children sitting on the grass playing with flowers in the sunshine while women hung laundry on a line.

The whole place had an easy, comfortable feel, with people going about their work with minimal oversight and everyone knowing their respective stations. They all seemed so happy. Hell, even 'Loram looked much more comfortable in his own skin as he strolled along behind the waddling Gruntâ€|and not in that cocky, obtuse Sangheili way; he looked as if he was genuinely enjoying himself.

As they came to an open doorway, the muffled sound of a tiny voice over crackling comms filtered out into the hall. Stepping into the room, the group was greeted by the sight of Stealth Major and four Minors lounging around a large table serving as a make-shift desk. They could see scrolls in cubbies along one wall, and framed papers with alien writing everywhere else. A thin woman was sitting cross-legged in the center of the tabletop, her long blonde hair cascading down her back and across her shoulders like a golden

waterfall. She pecked at a spot on a map, unferruled beneath her, with the sharp end of a pencil then made a circular mark. One of the Minors handed over a handheld radio and she grasped it without taking her eyes off the marking.

Putting it to her lips, "You tell that toad I don't care what \_he \_says," she set the pencil aside and snapped her fingers without looking up. The Major passed over a data pad, a crack visible in its face, "I'm looking at the photos \_right now\_. That herd is an easy fifty meters beyond your southern boundary on Daniel's grasslands."

Yipip toddled over, calling Amy by name. The woman looked up with a smile, her Sangheili companions glancing up, or over their shoulders, at the newcomers. They gave silent nods of acknowledgment as the blonde woman held up a finger, "I'm so sorry, this idiotâ€| " she began, interrupted by the voice from the comms.

She was dressed in a thin linen shirt, form-fitting kakhi pants and knee-high jack boots. Maggie had never seen many 'historians' in her life, but she imagined they would lookâ€|well, nerdy, and probably have more manners than to sit \_on \_tables.

When the whining excuses from the radio ceased, Amy handed the data pad back to the Major and the two of them shared a knowing look as she lifted the radio to her mouth, "Am I to assume that you really wish us to \_redraw \_jurisdictional boundaries just because your herdsman is a blithering idiot?"

The Sangheili around her snickered as she looked at her watch and waited for the crying placations to stop from whoever was talking on the other end.

"You have one hour, 'Lkor, \_one \_hour: after that, I \_will \_be informing Daniel of this trespass and your lord can take it up with \_him\_," with that, she slammed the radio down on the tabletop.

The Major nodded with a snort and Amy raked her fingers through her hair, collecting and twisting it into a bun and stabbing it in place with the pencil. The men rose and, as she threw her legs over the edge of the table, the Major grabbed her around her tiny waist and set her on her feet on the floor.

She began neatly gathering up the map, "If the herdsman or his stock are still there in an hour, kill him," she said casually. The Sangheili eagerly nodded.

Alright, that was it, Maggie was completely confused: apparently 'resident historian' had a \_completely \_different meaning on this planet than what she had imagined. She stepped over to 'Loram and bumped his arm lightly with her shoulder as Amy neatly rolled her map and the troops filed out, "What the heck is going on?" she whispered, "Why is Amy calling down a hit on a trespasser? I thought DelÃ©on said she was a historian."

Iruu looked down at her with a tiny smile, "She is," he whispered back, "in my culture, such people are responsible for keeping record of jurisdictional boundaries. There is little difference between this and the record of history. Without respect for one, a State would not have the other."



"And the killing part?" she looked up at him with an exasperated expression.

'Loram gave a mirthful snort, "For Sangheili, willful trespass is a capital offense, and if killing the offender does not resolve the matter, Daniel would be justified in waging war against the ruler of the jurisdiction."

"Jesus," Maggie muttered, "Territorial much."

He chuckled and shook his head as Amy made her grinning approach.

"\_Bonjour\_," she said, taking the time to greet everyone as Yipip waddled off toward an open foyer at the back of the room, calling for Naaco.

"I'm sorry about that," she said again, "I hoped to have time to prepare before you arrived but, every summer we have this problem with the herds from North Etienne, and Torschâ€¦" she blushed scarlet, "Major 'Korid, is ready for blood this time and I'm inclined to let his patrol have it."

There were uncomfortable nods from the group. Well, all except from 'Loram, he just stood there with a knowing smirk on his face.

A muffled \_thump \_sounded from the adjacent room and something rattled across the floor. Amy rolled her eyes and turned to the foyer, "Yipip," she hollered, "Naaco, you two stop jackassing around and get out here."

She looked back at the group and sighed, "They are two overgrown \_children\_," she grumped, crossing her arms and tapping her foot.

Yipip hurried out from the other room followed by a Sangheili in a light brown, sleeveless tunic taking apprehensive steps. As if things were not strange enough, Maggie looked at Naaco and had no idea what to think. He was looking at 'Loram with wide eyes like he saw the angel of death all the while running his palms across his forearms as if trying to shield from view the pale hash-marked scars that ran up to his elbows. Around his wrists were wide metallic bonds etched with triangular symbols. Aside from that, he was just plainâ€¦\_weird\_.

He wouldn't make direct eye contact with anyone; and, unlike the other Elites Maggie had seen, his gate wasn't a proud strut, and his movements weren't the controlled actions of a creature carefully displaying his physical strength. In fact, he didn't look like he \_had \_much physical strength. His stature was short and he looked thin. He was awkward and completely \_un-\_terrifying, as much as Maggie never imagined an Elite could be.

"Show these people to their rooms," Amy snapped, swatting at Yipip as he walked by, "And you," she pointed to Naaco and he hung his head, "go find a truck that will fit everyone," she turned back to Zeta and 'Loram, "is thirty minutes alright?"

The group nodded and the woman smiled broadly, "Good, I'll meet you on the west deck," she turned back to Naaco, "\_Shoo\_," she laughed

and the Sangheili skittered away.

As Yipip led everyone from the room and back out into the hall, Whittaker really wished Hursch was around to explain things. Failing that, when they were safely out of earshot, Maggie decided to take advantage of 'Loram's oddly pleasant mood.

"What's wrong with Naaco?" she whispered.

Iruu raised a brow and looked down at her, "Nothing."

"Why does he look that way?" she asked.

"What \_way\_?"

"Notâ€|\_manly\_," she clarified.

He looked at her with an expression of contained amusement before saying, "He is a \_slave\_."

Maggie made a face, "And just want does \_that \_mean?" she responded in an irritated whisper.

"It means he is harmless," he said, as if that were an explanation.

"Stop with the non-answers, Iruu: what is wrong with himâ€|why does he look like a girl\_?\_"

'Loram leveled that evil, lop-sided grin of his at her and it was Maggie's turn to blush.

"He was branded with the Mark of Disobedience. Unwilling or unable to commit ritual suicide he was found to be void of honor; and emasculated and sold into slavery."

\_Well, \_that\_ was certainly one way of keeping the number of men on the homeworld in check. \_

"His appearance simply indicates this occurred in childhood."

"\_Shit,\_" Maggie whispered, discomfort and disgust in her voice.

Iruu just shrugged and began climbing the stairs behind the rest of Zeta and Yipip.

\* \* \*

><p>'Loram stood out on the balcony and turned his face to the setting suns as he sniffed the air. This place looked like home, and it <em>smelled <em>like home, and it sounded like home. The mansion was not fashioned from the rustic, hewn stone of a proper kaidon's manor, but it has the feel of authority just as every such residence he had ever infiltrated. With rich tapestries and stunning views, and the sounds of servants bustling around, Iruu could close his eyes and pretendâ€|

Somewhere between Earth and Ambrosia II, 'Loram had stopped kidding

himself: 'Vadum and the Arbiter had sent him with Zeta because he was the most qualified soldier they had readily available. He was chosen because he was convenient and disposable. He didn't begrudge them their reasoning. For however short a time, Iruu would get to be who he once was. It was a lie he found fitting.

And, now, he felt a selfish excitement at Maggie's questions and the way she approached him unafraid.

Her newness to his culture had made him realize just how much he missed his own world.

He snorted irritably and began to pace, the deck creaking beneath his feet. The Unggoy had brought them to a third story guest quarters lined with immense bedrooms, each opening to a common gallery that faced the ocean. The many times in his life had he taken up in such a place it was usually the result of deception of a completely different kind and by this hour a man was lying dead in a locked room and Iruu was taking advantage of certain privileges with the mark's wife, or Mistress.

He may not have earned the Decree of Preclusion, but he felt he surly deserved it. Though he had done nothing legally wrong, and only what was socially expected, in doing so he had not been faithful to Gia's memory, and now there were a lot of dead women because of him.

Iruu paused and clasped his hands to his forehead. Being here was playing tricks on his brain. His mind was not right and he wanted to blame her. Not just because his pulse quickened when she spoke to him, but because there were things he could no longer help but think. Banter which he knew to be meaningless for Maggie was agonizing for what little of him had any decency left, and he knew that man was quickly losing the battle for his self-control.

He resumed pacing and tried to think about other things.

In the upcoming tour they would be shown highlights of the area's jurisdiction and Amy would recount general history having to do with territory, the development of economic and social markets, and reconstruction. Later, they would dine with DelÃ©on and likely those she counted as closest to her: Daniel previously excluded for understandable reasons.

Iruu was rather looking forward to eating food instead of the nutrient rich, cracker-like field rations he had brought so he could avoid purely human cuisine. Humans were too fond of starch and carbohydrates, and frying everything.

After the meal, if the Kaidon's wife kept with custom, she would take them on a private tour of the mansion and show off clan antiquities...or what would pass for them here, while she told a more detailed, personal history. Then, everyone would retire for the evening and Iruu would get to bathe in a shower which would accommodate his size and go to sleep in a bed that was designed to fit a Sangheili.

He was smiling to himself at these mundane thoughts when Maggie walked out onto the balcony. He almost cursed aloud, but instead, he turned and took hold of the railing, staring out at the beach with its lapping waves while he tried his level best to ignore her.

She proceeded to walk right up to him and seemed to follow his gaze. Leaning to rest her elbows on the balustrade and her face in her hands, she sighed. He could not bring himself to look down at her for fear of all \_that \_would do to him, but he still smiled in spite of himself. The growing comfort he felt with the things she invoked in him was depraved, and the way in which she was unashamedly secure in approaching him was not helpful.

Finally, Maggie turned to him, resting her back against a support beam and folding her arms as she crossed one ankle over the other. He watched her watching him in his periphery for a few moments then, in the spirit of self-indulgence, huffed playfully, "What do you want from me, \_woman\_?"

Whittaker tilted her face toward the canopy and laughed then looked at him, shaking her head, "Just wondering; but you sort of answered that question, \_thank you very much\_, " she cackled smartly.

Iruu felt a tightness in his chest at the familiar mischief in her voice, "What?" he heard himself ask jokingly, peering at her from the corner of his eye.

Part of him said he should not have kept encouraging this but he had never been historically good at listening to that voice when it came to women.

She shrugged, "I just wondered if this was close enough to home for you that it was going to go to your head and make you go back to being a sexist pig."

'Loram snorted, straightening and glowering down at her, "I have never been a \_sexist pig\_," he snapped, feigning irritation.

Maggie laughed, unperturbed, "Uh-huh, is that why your opinions make you \_sound like a dick\_."

He narrowed his eyes. It was only a little disconcerting at how easy this teasing was for her and Iruu now found himself biting down on his mandibles to keep from making a crude, phallic remark in response. Instead, he stood there for a few seconds just watching her as she peered fearlessly up at him.

She quirked one eyebrow.

Only one other woman had been brazen enough to challenge him openly like this. Gia had been royalty when he was just a cadet, she had \_no\_ \_reason\_ \_to have been afraid of him, but Maggieâ€|

Such flirtation was uncultured, and crass, and damn it, enjoyable in the most lewd of ways. \_Oh\_ \_hells\_, \_what was his problem? He was a Special Operations Commander: Field Master for the R'Eesa Warrior CrÃ"che; an assassin for the High Council of the State of Sudin; an Aristocrat: a Swordsman of the House of Loramâ€|he could have any female of age he chose.

\_No, no you \_are not, \_no you \_cannot\_: she is a human, she does \_not\_ \_understand.\_

As he stood there, wrestling to bring his baser instincts into

subjection, a catlike smile slowly spread across her face and he felt his sense of decorum come completely undone.

A vehicle's horn tooted in rapid succession and Maggie mercifully broke eye contact to turn and look down over the railing. Below, Iruu saw Naaco pile from an open-top utility truck and flit across to disappear under the balcony onto the porch below.

Amy's voice filtered up from downstairs and when Iruu looked up, Maggie was sauntering back to her room.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Orbit over Ambrosia II<br>\*\_\*\*UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\*\_\*\*1900 Local (Time Approximate)\*\*

The terminal line between night and day was creeping across the red and blue planet below. Debra Jay stood at a window looking out at the sight. Slow, deep breaths caused a gentle rise and fall of her shoulders as she pensively drummed the fingers of one hand against the thick glass. Her left arm hung limp at her side: the middle, ring, and small fingers of the hand twisted together and draped into a tentacle that coiled angrily at her feet.

Hilda wasn't certain what the woman was seeing, or if she had yet given up her determination to get herself and the others off of the shipâ€|maybe she was just thinking.

It mattered very little.

The gentle patting of Jay's fingers came to a stop, streaking green fluids across the pane as she let her hand fall to her side. Hilda wondered briefly if she would go back to storming the halls and screeching Signe's name as she had done upon finding the escape pods and lifeboats gone.

Signe was no longer listening: he was too busy fighting himself, and not just in a morality crisis way: he was \_literally\_ \_fighting\_ himself.

The sub-fragment and all the uncertainty he had wrought was causing the main processor to fragment further. There wasn't any \_more\_ of Signe, just the same information-mass split into compartmentalized segments.

This was the point at which the AI would be the most dangerous. His matrix would be desperate to assemble the knowledge and use it. Hilda had to be careful following the pathways left by the sub-fragment in her spying: Signe had \_always\_ \_been a cannibal; and there were parts of him which wouldn't take kindly to finding her snooping around, no matter how little damage she could do at this point. Though he couldn't harm her primary systems, her fragment being firewalled, he could force her to sever it. There were simply too many of him at this point to fight off and too much knowledge for her to risk giving up.

While Zeta and 'Loram were down there playing house with the local aristocracy Hilda was doing her best to build Signe's trust and keep

him from going into full meltdown. If he did, he would likely send \_Deoxy's \_reactor into meltdown.

A lot of lives and mission success were at stake. Hilda found herself wishing diplomacy didn't take such care and time because she was uncertain how much longer she would be able to keep Captain Benton and Shipmaster 'Torev at bay.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>18 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Ambrosia II<br>Keep proper/ New Saint Etienne  
>1930 Local<strong>

It was the day that would never end. Maggie felt like she had been awake for a week. Ambrosia II had twenty-eight hour days, give or take. With fourteen approximate hours of daylight, the suns were only just beginning to set. Whittaker tried to do the mental math and came up certain it was already \_tomorrow\_ back on Earth. There were less days in the year, but more hours in the day...hell, it probably wasn't even really October on this planet.

From now on, anyone Whittaker heard bemoaning that there were not enough hours in the day was going to get punched in the throat.

\_Fuck my life\_, Maggie thought as she flopped face down across the huge bed, letting herself sink into the fluffy bedding as she groped blindly for a pillow with which to cover her head.

For just a few moments she wanted to lay there and just \_lie\_ to herself and think of all the glorious sleep she would not be having later. That, and she really wanted a few moments to pretend this day was not happening.

Maggie wasn't sure she could do any of this anymore. Her brain hurt. She wanted to go \_away\_, wherever that would be. She imagined it was some place normal: where Elites still thought of her as an intestinal parasite and the only men who wanted to fuck her silly were human.

Maggie felt like a complete moron, especially because Hursch had tried to warn herâ€|in his overly polite, officer-ish way.

Maggie rolled over, flinging the pillow and muttering to herself, "\_He likes you\_."

\_Goddamnit, Shawn, could you have been a little less vague, you fucking ass-hat?\_

No, it wasn't his fault. There wasn't an ounce of back-down in her, and precious little in the way of a filter between her brain and her mouth. Sure, she could be genteel and polished when she needed to be, she had been a debutante for shit's sake; but it had been entirely too much fun seeing 'Loram in his element and Whittaker had forgotten just what she was really dealing with, again.\_.

Alliances tended to do perverse things to the ones surviving in their wake. Societal boundaries were redrawn in more than political and jurisdictional ways; norms of acceptable behavior were modified and

excused; and just as one learned to stop looking at the enemy as an adversary, one stopped looking at him as a different species altogether and started seeing him as a person.

And, \_Goddamnit\_, was it really so wrong to be too tired to think straight?

No, it was the fact that she had kept pushing at him, hearing full well the dark forwardness as it had crept into his voice: \_that\_ was what was wrong. And she should have known better. On more than one occasion in her life being an insufferable tease gotten her into trouble—but this was taking the fucking cake.

\_Tactical Retreat\_: that shit you're supposed to do when things are about to go in a predictably bad direction and you don't need to be around for it—you know, Maggie, that thing you \_didn't\_ do with the ODS Captain, the Master Sergeant from the 217th Armor, that Lieutenant from 68th Cavalry—and Paul—

Maggie sat up on the bed and made a gagging face.

Okay, okay, so she had a bad track record, a \_really\_ bad track record, of falling into bed with men and using them for as long as she needed them, which was a couple of hours...at the most. Then she went on about her life like nothing happened. It worked in her world. She was just thankful Paul was down for acting like nothing happened and they never spoke of it \_ever\_ again.

That was another problem: the desperate lack of personal boundaries and it was starting to spill over into a realm she recognized as potentially dangerous.

A man would push and she would push right back, but this time, that man was Sangheili.

While Teddy, Beth, and Paul had clamored down the stairs to meet with Amy, Maggie had paused in the hall to look at a painting. Okay, she was lingering on purpose; the painting was just an excuse. Anyhow, it didn't take long for Iruu's feet to drum against the floor at her side and she smiled to herself when she knew he had stopped next to her.

From the corner of her eye she saw him looking at the artwork, his head cocked to one side. The image was of a Sangheili wielding what looked to be archetypal energy swords. The creature looked back at the world with hooded eyes and swirling garments that hinted at dance-like movement. The clothing was corded in a familiar fashion and bangles hung in abundance from delicate wrists. As she found herself actually looking at the painting, Maggie realized the image was of a female.

"That's a woman," she had blurted.

Iruu had simply nodded, "She is the Mistress Herra 'Berovai."

Maggie crinkled her face, trying to make that information make sense; it seemed completely backwards given what she already knew.

Looking down at her expression, Loram had huffed a laugh, "She a legend amongst the women, and some men, of my culture: the only

female to have ever been recognized as a Swordsman."

"I didn't think that would be, you knowâ€|\_allowed\_â€|women having \_their place\_ and all."

He had chuckled deep in his chest, "It is not; but, she was taken by the Kaidon of the State of Berov," he paused before saying darkly, "and he denied her \_nothing\_."

There had been an intimacy in the way he spoke which Maggie could not place.

She had looked at him, watching as his eyes studied the painting; seeing the wheels in his brain turning. Okay, in her own defense, it was so not fair to start a story like that then just stand there letting it linger, "And?" she prompted.

"\_Forbidden lust\_," he said seductively, "He loved her, \_and she killed him.\_" \_

Whittaker crossed her arms against the tingle that ran up her spine. But instead of backing off she pushed, "Why?"

For some reason her heart had done a back flip straight into her stomach when he turned to look at her with those deep orange eyes.

A crooked smile pulled at his mandibles and she felt her skin go flush, then he took a very deliberate step into her personal space and a rush of cold had washed across her making her breakout in goosebumps. He leaned down and she never thought to pull away as he drew his face close to hers and whispered with all the comfort of a lover, "Because, he\_ let\_ her."

Of course, \_that \_made her mind take a very direct path into the gutter. He had pulled away with a smirk, like he \_knew, \_and walked off leaving her standing there feeling completely naked.

And, as if that had not been bad enough, while they were out on their little whirlwind tour Maggie had caught him looking back at her, a lot. It had been out of the corner of his eye but it messed with her head just the same making the previous exchange play over and over in her mind.

She didn't remember half of what they had seen or what Amy had blabberd on about. Her brain was completely fried. She had found herself honest-to-God thinking about things she had no business thinking about and worse, wondering if she was capable of being \_that \_kind of girl...and justifying it.

What woman didn't appreciate the proper use of the English language? And, damn it, hundreds of years of feminism couldn't seem to program the female psyche out of wanting to think bad boys just needed to be loved; what kind of heartless psycho looked at someone who had been effectively thrown away and didn't go '\_aww' \_just a little bit? And, seriously, what sane woman could hear the depth of that voice and \_not \_feel her insides quiver?

Whittaker giggled aloud then clamped her hands over her mouth. She seriously needed to get...yeah, but, just, no way. She stood and picked at her uniform, grabbing her rifle and slinging it over her



shoulder. She had a dinner to get to; all of this ridiculousness \_had\_ to be exhaustion talking.

## 12. Chapter 12

### Chapter Twelve

\*\*1800October 2563  
>Beta Centauri System<br>Ambrosia II  
>Keep proper New Saint Etienne  
>2030 Local<strong>

"I was fifteen," DelÃ©on said, folding a cloth napkin neatly and putting in it her plate.

When these people put on an evening meal, they meant business. Steele had expected something fancy and special for the occasion, but she had never expected what had ensued.

When Zeta and 'Loram had made their way into the main dining hall and had arranged themselves opposite the Kaidon's wife, with Amy and Major 'Korid flanking her, an entire parade of servant staff brought out quantities of food Beth had not seen since Christmas dinner at her great-grandmother's house. No, even Nana would have been in awe: meats of every shade and texture; vegetables steamed, mashed, buttered, and baked; and breads of every imaginable shape and configuration.

It was a good thing Zeta was hungry and not new to eating stuff they couldn't readily identify. The smell had been amazing. Even Maggie had managed to eat more than a few bites, though she seemed more interested in the \_wine \_being served and looked just as distracted as she had all afternoon.

Steele had been a bit apprehensive when she had realized it was expected that they consume alcohol with the meal: being customary to both cultures. Maggie had a bit of an issue when it came to drinking, though Beth knew whisky to be her libation of choice. Hell, it wasn't exactly like Beth could preach too much about breaking regs on \_this\_ mission. At least the Staff Sergeant was trying to keep it within an acceptable level: it wasn't like she was drinking straight from a cask or anything.

Meanwhile, the idea of eating in the presence of a couple of Elites had been concerning. With faces like that, Steele wasn't sure being in the vicinity of 'Loram and 'Korid while they ate would be a palatable thing; but the two of them managed to do so with more grace than Sanders.

It wasn't until the meal had been eaten, and the servants began clearing the table, that DelÃ©on had spoken.

Steele understood this to be an important part of the whole confirmation of an agreement: i.e, the agreement that Daniel would grant them access to the arsenal which sat inside his immediate jurisdiction.

The city and county tour they had been taken on had been impressive from a strictly developmental standpoint. How these people managed to

come this far without outside help was awe inspiring, Beth had to admit.

Amy had left out a great deal of detail, giving them the broad picture, telling them there were things the Lady of the Keep would wish to share herself, and things it wasn't Amy's place to tell. That was why everything Lucinda was about to say was so important. They had already told her why they were here and what had led up to their arrival: now it was her turn.

DelÃ©on had her Historian and Chief of Jurisdictional Security Officer as support. That was fair, Zeta and 'Loram had tag-teamed their way through their account, and whatever this woman was about to tell was bound to be a lot more personally traumatic.

On the tour, Beth had seen the methane pipelines running from sanitation dumps; a partially recovered electrical and phone grid; a water pumping and treatment plant; roving security; a prison; a hospital; fancy markets selling all kind of things; herds of livestock in the fields; vineyards, wineries, farms, stores, parks, factories; monuments to families and ancestors; \_Vengeant Shepherd \_like a silent testament to a battle unknown; and the arsenal lingering in the distance with its own security on patrol.

In general the populace was the most armed group of people Beth had ever seen. Clearly they embraced the Sangheili custom of openly bearing arms. Amy had assured them that neighboring cities were individual entities, but everyone counted themselves a subversive to Daniel though he was said to regard them as his contemporaries. They had a High Council of both humans and Sangheili who acted as legislators and judiciary, and a Kaidon who was their executor. Laws were regulated in the manner of a true republic, with high crimes punishable by a term of confinement, indentured servitude, slavery, disfigurement, or death. People seemed happy in this conglomerate society of their own design.

Daniel had apparently been one hell of an impassable force. Like countless nations before them, the people of New Saint Etienne and the stranded Covenant troops turned to the man who had helped them attain their status to lead them in an official capacity. He and Lucinda took over the mansion; from there he selected his personal leadership and drafted Writes of Boundary, the people selected councilmen and began hashing out laws; everyone worked to clear away the mess and repair the infrastructure; and at some point, Daniel took DelÃ©on as his wife.

"My mother and father were members of the Caddo Rebel Fighters," DelÃ©on continued, "I never knew life could be any different."

Everyone sat in silence as she began picking at the edge of the tablecloth. Amy looked at her with a soft expression and Major 'Korid folded his arms on the edge of the table and gave her an encouraging nod.

"I know what I tell you will likely determine how the UNSC deals with the people on this planet when you leave. Just know: Daniel's men are not loyal to him because of who he was, but because of who he \_is\_."

Major 'Korid grunted in agreement.

These people were organized and that was probably a veiled threat. Most of the humans didn't know anything but war and strife and Steele got the idea whatever they had gone through to build this life was worth fighting for, again if necessary. The former Covenant soldiers likely knew there was no going back. Starting over as asylum seekers would be unacceptable: not that she believed they would ask but because she knew they would be seen as entirely too dangerous.

"There were three primary rebel factions operating within the country when I was growing up: the Caddo Rebel Fighters, the Outer Insurgent Movement, and Ashmund's Freedom Front," she swallowed and her eye focused on her hands, "I set a group of explosives along an electrical conduit and was on my way back to the rally point when the Covenant ships began appearing in planet. \_There were so many of them\_. Smaller craft began pouring out and then the raid sirens came to life as our explosives began going off. All hell broke loose."

She paused for a moment, "I never found my own group, and I hid as best I could. Some of Ashmund's men found me and we tried to ride it out, but, they were captured. An Elite sort of, found me. He didn't try to hurt me and that's when I realized the Covenant was truly fighting itself. There was a skirmish and he was killed," she reached to touch the cloth covering her eye, "Shrapnel got my eye and the Brutesâ€¦got \_me\_, " she let her hand fall as she turned her face to the ceiling and breathed deeply, "I was their captive for twenty-six \_days.\_"

"The Legion was shattered by the betrayal," Major 'Korid rumbled, "The Brutes on \_Vengeant Shepherd\_ focused their efforts on wresting control of the ship," the Sangheili smirked, "Many of the ground troops took up to aid their brothers on the flagship and the rest were left to fend for themselves. With the majority of the Jiralhanae gone, those remaining were starving within days, uncoordinated, and without discernible leadership."

"Every day, they would kill and cook people," DelÃ©on began again, "Every day, I heard people screaming as they died. \_Everyday\_, I wasâ€¦" a hard expression twisted her face for a moment but began to relax in increments, "I can't walk unaided because of what they did to me. And when they ran out of other people to eat, when I was certain it would finally be my turn to die, they threw Daniel into the cell," she brushed at crumbs on the tabletop, "I couldn't imagine a creature more unfortunate than myself until I saw him. He was a naked, bloody pile on the floor," she shook her head, "but he was alive. And, I was so happy not to be alone in that placeâ€¦" a tear streaked down her face, "I gave him what little water I had andâ€¦I thought he was going to be their next meal when they came and took him away," she scrunched up her face, "I could hear him screaming outside for what felt like forever then they brought him back and I realized they intended, for whatever depraved reason, to make his death take as long as possible. Eventually, after days of torture, they broke his hand completely off and his arm was just a shard of bone," tears fell from her eye and dripped from her chin, "There were chunks of him missing that looked like bite marks and he had blisters all over his bodyâ€¦" she sniffed, "When he woke I offered him water and I tried to help him drink but one day they...cut his tongue out."

He was unconscious when a Bruteâ€| " she shuddered, "noticed \_me\_ andâ€| "

Amy reached and took Lucinda's hand, winding their fingers together. The Kaidon's wife bowed her head and took a few breaths before looking back up, "You eventually stop fighting it and just \_go\_ somewhere else \_in your mind. But," her lips hinted at a tiny smile, "I never got the chance that day," she said, her voice dropping to a deadly tone, "The moment that Brute turned his back on Daniel he came to life. He grabbed that monstrosity by the hair of its head and rammed the shard of his arm through its neck."

Steele was thankful for the moment of silence that lingered as she chewed that detail over. She had never experienced being a prisoner of war, and while she had heard desperate people would do unheard of things in order to survive she had a difficult time imagining being desperate enough to stab someone with her broken arm.

"Daniel started pulling grenades from the Brute's clothing and once he got a weapon in his hand it was over for them. He wouldn't leave me, I could barely walk. He carried me. He got us to a Banshee andâ€|we were free," she pursed her lips and toyed with a bracelet on her wrist; "He says I saved him but he saved me. We raided a burned out farmhouse and I did my best to patch him up and find some clothes and I made him bathe in a nearby river, then one night we stood on a butte and watched\_ Vengeant Shepherd \_sink from the sky."

"The Legion Master sabotaged the ship, when systems failed the remaining flight-worthy vessels not trapped within its field and brought permanently to the ground fled," 'Korid said, "Jiralhanae troops went mad: nothing is more brainless than an enraged, grieving Brute who has just watched three-quarters of his fellows die and much of the remainder abandon him."

"It took Daniel three days to heal," DelÃ©on said, "We ate what food I found in the house and he killed rabbits and squirrels and we slept in the wood line at night. After sufficient rest, one day he got up and that was that, we started walking and found other survivors along the way," 'Korid's mandibles pulled into a tiny smile and she reached for him. He took her hand before turning to Amy.

"And that's when we found out it was so much worse," Lucinda continued, "Azrael Ashmund had survived the attack and set himself up as dictator," she shook her head, "He had the resources even then because that had been his plan all along. Anyone who had ever crossed him or refused to ally themselves with him was killed."

"It wasn't bad enough that the Covies hit New Saint Etienne with enough of an EMP to wipe the AI at Colonial Headquarters," Amy said, "They knocked out our generators and power. \_No one\_ was prepared for the attack. We had no warning at all; and all the weapons and ammunition we had was what we had outside the armory. That didn't last long. Without electricity, we had no real vehicles, no functioning tools and what few generators had been shut down and left usable after the attack came were not enough to open the armory doors. When Ashmund took over, his men and the Covenant were pretty much the only players in the game with weapons."

Steele leveled a blank look at the woman and she returned the expression.

"You'd be surprised just how many of us \_use to be \_UNSC, Warrant," Amy brushed a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, "After the Brutes went ape-shit what we did have was a lot of Elites suddenly on our side, and by 'our' I mean: humans in general. We got a few trucks running, water systems functioning, hell, we even managed to get a small part of the electrical grid back up. It wasn't until the situation started to seem a little under control that Ashmund's men made their play. They hit us hard. Killed Elites and anyone not in Azrael's club: as in, \_the rest of humanity\_."

"Those of us who were able assisted the humans who had stood by our side in fleeing the city," 'Korid added, "Daniel and DelÃ©on came upon our encampment while we were still planning the assault on Ashmund's fortification."

"Daniel led the attack and drug Azreal from this house himself," Amy said, "He took him to the city line and lopped his head off before impaling him on a pike and setting his corpse on fire."

Lucinda laughed softly, "No one claimed allegiance to Azreal after that and anyone who was found to have been in his faction were killed outright. Daniel had no patience for what Azrael had done."

All of Zeta sat quietly. What the hell was there really left to say?

Teddy leaned forward in the ensuing silence, steepling his fingers before his face, "I don't mean to be rude here," he began, "but, why do you call him 'Daniel'?"

Lucinda smiled, as did her companions, "I was wondering how long until one of you asked. Come with me: I'll show you."

\* \* \*

><p>Sergeant Paul Sanders felt like a nine-year old all over again: school field trip style. Everyone had followed DelÃ©on, Amy, and Major Squid-Face back down a familiar hall lined with windows. In the light of late afternoon, Paul could see Daniel and a small gathering of Elites in civilian attire out on the side lawn.<p>

\_Good God, they looked even more freakish in knee-pants and linen shirtsâ€| \_

And, now 'Loram was being an exceptional kiss-ass: allowing himself to be led around by Lucinda as she walked holding his arm and he carried her cane. Then there was Amy, who might have been completely bangable except she clearly had a thing for men who were tall, dark, and scaly.

\_Gag\_.

Then there was Maggie: what in the holy mother of fuck was going on with her? She looked like hammered dog shit, she had been only too happy to have alcohol around, and she and 'Loram kept eyeing each other and it was getting kind of creepyâ€|and gross. Whittaker was one amazingly fucked up chick, with some \_serious \_daddy issues, but he could not force himself to think she could be like \_that\_.

\_See, there, they're doing it \_againâ€|

Paul scowled at Maggie, trying to will her to look at his disapproving glare, but it didn't work and he almost ran smack into a display case for his effort. He hopped sideways and skipped on one foot before catching his balance.

DelÃ©on had led everyone back through the organized mess of Amy's office, which turned out to be an anteroom to a damned \_museum\_ and an honest-to-God \_library\_. Aside from shit Paul saw as glorified junk pulled from a landfill, he was a bit startled to see books...like, for real \_books\_: the kind made out of \_paper\_. \_The age of data pads and electronic readers had eclipsed the paper book a \_long \_time ago and the last time he remembered seeing one was at a museumâ€|

\_Oh, wait.\_

The gaping room ascended from the ground floor up three full stories to an expansive skylight, and there were catwalks around each level, and little ladders for reaching high places leaned here and there. Floor lamps and sconces illuminated the area: motes of dust floating in the shafts of light that brought attention toâ€|junk.

There were clay casks of various shapes and sizes, faded and crumpled papers neatly stacked behind glass, letters with alien scribbles in frames, paintings in muted colors, and various works in stages of completion leaned against one wall. The whole room smelled of pine and leather and dirt.

"It is customary for the mansion of the Kaidon to host the antiquities of his clan," 'Loram rumbled as he walked past with Lucinda who nodded approvingly.

Sanders rolled his eyes and paused next to Whittaker as she looked over a line of paintings depicting Sangheili in various types of armor.

"Daniel tells me these are devoted to his ancestry: that they are notable warriors of his bloodline," DelÃ©on said as she brushed slowly past.

"And those," Steele asked, showing uncharacteristic interest as she looked up at what appeared to be the depiction of a swampy bayou with a paddling boat tethered in the moonlight.

"He painted everything you see in the house," Lucinda answered, "Some things have more meaning than others. I like to think these are the things from his previous life worth remembering," there was a degree of sadness and reservation in her voice before she forced a smile and continued, "The books were a resident acquisition and the pieces on display are an assortment of relics significant to our people; you are welcome to look around for as long as you like; but what I want to show you is in here."

With that Amy retrieved a set of keys from her belt and 'Korid swung aside a panel of shelves so she could unlock a carefully concealed door. Lucinda retrieved her cane from 'Loram and stepped through and switched on a light.

The room beyond was an office of sorts with a large, single window draped in heavy curtains. Inside was a desk and chair: something overly huge which appeared to have come from a Covenant ship. DelÃ©on made her way around the desk leaning her cane against a bank of shelves before reaching to take hold of a machete, the hilt wound in yellowed and stained cloth and held in place with strips of cord.

As she turned with the object the maker's mark which bore the name Daniel Fordyce in looping script could still be seen etched into its battered surface.

"While I was scavenging the farmhouse for any food I could find my companion was raiding the tool shed for potential weapons. I came out to see him wielding this," she shrugged, "I called him \_Daniel \_from that day forward," she smiled, "He never seemed to mind and when we came upon the othersâ€|he later told me he forbid them to speak his name or acknowledge him by rank: \_that man was dead\_. They all called him Daniel, also."

She placed to the weapon back on its stand on the shelf and took up her cane to walk to the window pushing aside the drapes to look onto the side lawn.

Outside, Daniel and a few others were gathered with training weapons. Naaco stood among them, though he was keeping close to the Kaidon's shadow.

"He tells me beforeâ€|he was not a good man. Naaco is Daniel's," she paused, letting the heavy curtains fall back into place as she hung her head and leaned heavily on the cane, "The man he was did that to his own son," she turned back to look at everyone bringing her fingers momentarily to her lips, "He," she tried to begin then shook away a thought, "He said, because of me, he understands the things he has done, that he has come to regret the actions taken in anger when honor would have allowed him to show mercy to his house...as I did to him."

With that Lucinda straightened and held her head high, tipping her chin as she began back toward the door. As everyone filed out and Amy pushed the door closed behind them, DelÃ©on turned, "Daniel will take you to the arsenal tomorrow morning, after sun up," she said as an afterthought, moving to 'Loram and taking his arm.

She gave him a sly smile, running her hand across the polished surface of his armor, "Daniel would like you to join him and some of his men this evening for the Okona."

He looked down at her with both brow ridges raised, "Iâ€|would be honored, my lady," he said with the slightest of hesitation.

"Good," she chirped, "West lawn: at sundown," releasing his arm she looked up to address everyone, "If you'll excuse me, I have some matters to attend to. Please, stay as long as you wish."

\* \* \*

><p>The reddish orb of the combined suns was just touching the horizon when Maggie stepped out onto the balcony. She paused for a moment and took a deep breath of the salty air before walking down the open gallery to where 'Loram was sitting against the

deck.<p>

Whittaker found herself shaking her head at the sight of him. Like an overgrown kid, he sat with his legs through the rungs of the balustrade, swinging his feet idly; his arms folded against the railing and his chin in his hands as he looked out at the pre-sunset.

He heard her soft laugh as she approached and sat down next to him, looping her legs to dangle through the rungs and peering out.

Neither of them spoke for what felt a small eternity: both staring out at the horizon lit in shades of red, orange, and pink, and the glittering ocean as colored waves broke across the deep bronze sand. A few people milled about the mansion's private pier, tethering small boats and untangling nets, workers making ready for tomorrow's day of fishing.

"You know who Daniel is, don't you?" Whittaker finally said, breaking the silence.

Iruu sighed heavily and Maggie heard him shift uncomfortably before answering, "I know who he was."

The tour had been on par with what 'Loram had expected although he had not anticipated being allowed such a personal glimpse into Daniel's life.

There was little doubt in Iruu's mind the room they had been shown to was the Kaidon's personal office. While such a place would logically contain bits from the man's former life it was unsettling to see the pieces of evidence so clearly on display despite assurances by his wife that he no longer held to who he once was.

While much of the paintings and antiquities were innocuous, what 'Loram did recognize was something that seemed to go unnoticed by the reminder of the group, save Major 'Korid who simply gave the slightest of nods, affirming the look of quiet suspicion which Iruu had unknowingly let creep onto his face.

It had begun at the expansive desk. Oversized and ornately etched; in a shade of dark purple; battered and crudely repaired; its face still bore the name Vengeant Shepherd.   

Then, as Lucinda retrieved her quarry, 'Loram had let his eyes travel the room. Tucked in the corner of the office, on a stand which was ill-suited to display it properly, the dark fur of a Legion Master's cloak hung as it puddled to the floor. The garment was such a deep shade of emerald it could have been mistaken for black, and likely went unnoticed by his human companions in the shadow. Not that the Sagheili imagined the humans would assign any significance to the tattered and worn garment.

This also caused Iruu to feel slightly annoyed he had been too distracted to put Naaco in proper perspective.

Only the highest ranking Sangheili military leaders were permitted to have slaves of their own race accompany them in the field. Knowing Daniel had been the kind of man who could have marked and enslaved



his own son only further confirmed to Iruu that the Kaidon had been \_Recompense's\_ notorious Legion Master.

Even thoroughly maimed, and having taken steps to shed his former self, the Kaidon of Caddo Parish and New Saint Etienne could \_never\_ undo the tens of thousands of years of viciousness which sprang from his bloodline.

Daniel had been Kaidon of his State on the homeworld: a man young for rulership who followed in the footsteps of those before him with ruthlessness toward his enemies, callousness toward his allies, and unyielding mercilessness toward his own house. The State of Berov fell in antiquity when its Kaidon took pity on the woman who would become Mistress Herra 'Berovai. His love for her condemned his lineage and, once raised from shame, no ruler thereafter displayed even a hint of mercy, even when law and honor would allow it. The rulers of Berov were widely known for their heartlessness and staunch adherence to the letter of the law.

This disposition had been well suited for the battlefield and the man who would become \_Recompense's\_ Legion Master had been known for his own brutality and the maliciousness which this inspired in his men. Daniel had been a legend among his own people, and Special Operations, before he found humility and took a human name and a human wife.

"Are you going to kill him?" Maggie asked, her voice pulling Iruu from his thoughts.

He scoffed, "No. We have been here for hours: if I intended to assassinate him, I assure you, he would be dead already."

Whittaker laughed softly at his self-assurance.

"If he regrets the things he's done," she said, "why does he keep his son as a slave? Why not let him go?" she asked, turning her face to look up at him.

Iruu worked his mandibles for a moment, "It does not work that way," he finally answered, "Naaco has been marked. If he were found without bonds he would likely be," he paused for a moment, "the punishment for an escaped slave is death. The manacles bear Daniel's name. Only a fool would harm a Kaidon's slave. It is the only way Daniel can protect his son now."

"What's the Okona?" Maggie asked.

Tilting his head, Iruu could see just her face peeking through the rails as she looked out toward the ocean, "It is a traditional sparring match," he said, "A gentlemanly contest."

Maggie just hummed in response, then, "Can I come?"

He leaned back and peered at her, inwardly smiling. Eventually she turned and looked up at him with that expression which spoke of utter fearlessness in the face of what she was asking.

\_She\_ \_does not...oh, to the hells with it...\_

"If you wish," he answered softly.

### 13. Chapter 13

#### Chapter Thirteen

\*\*18 October 2653

>Beta Centauri System<br>Ambrosia II

>Keep proper New Saint Etienne

>2330 Local<strong>

The crest of the red-rimmed suns had almost completely sunk beyond the horizon and only a tiny sliver remained to cast the west lawn in fiery light and shadow as Whittaker made her way to the wide gallery.

She had not been entirely certain she would really go, even after a din of voices had risen from the lawn. No matter how happy Iruu seemed to answer her questions she was starting to feel as if she were intruding; maybe getting \_too\_ comfortable talking to him. When Maggie had crept to the balcony railing to see a small collection of Sangheili in the failing light it occurred to her then the Okona could have been some ritual, manly thing to which she probably shouldn't have invited herself; but DelÃ©on's voice and Amy's laughter had bolstered her curiosity.

Whittaker had stepped from the house onto the porch and was a bit startled to see 'Loram in civilian attire and to realize she had grown familiar enough with him she could pick him out from the throng of Sangheili milling about in the half-darkness. There were twenty or so of them, all in casual pants which fell to their knees, some with, and a few without, shirts. The illicit thrill Maggie had felt at recognizing Iruu was overwhelmed by pure embarrassment at appraising his shirtless form beyond how scarred he was: she \_had\_ \_to\_ find something else to focus on.

There were torches lit around the courtyard, throwing light and shadow in the growing darkness. The men made idle chatter in their native language and Maggie got the distinct impression by their mannerisms whatever was about to happen was not an uncommon event.

"I was hoping you were really coming," DelÃ©on said as she approached.

In her utterly shameless manner, the Kaidon's wife walked right up to Whittaker and looped her arm through Maggie's, pulling her along the porch to where Amy was standing. The other woman stood near the railing, wrapping Daniel's proffered hand as he held a long, ornately carved staff propped in the crook of his maimed arm.

"They have done this almost every evening since we moved into the house," Lucinda said, beaming as she brushed the side of her husband's face. She then nodded toward the gathered men, "This is something from their homeworld. They learn to fight like this as children so, I think there is some comfort in the traditional exercise."

"Ah, yes, the joy of beating the snot out of each other at sundown with wooden poles according to rules I still can't figure out: so

soothing," Amy added with a laugh, resituating a strip of binding on Daniel's hand and winding it up his wrist.

"It's a contest of personal conduct more than one of individual skill," Lucinda continued undaunted, "A challenge among gentleman."

"\_Gentleman\_," Amy snorted sarcastically, cinching and loosening the binding, turning Daniel's hand over to inspect her work. Daniel laughed in his throaty way and Maggie gaped at him, eyeing his hand as he wiggled his mangled fingers against the wrapping.

"The object is to knock the opponent to the ground, with an okona," DelÃ©on said.

Daniel hefted the staff weapon in his hand, stepping back to hold it out at arm's length as if on display.

"You'reâ€¦you're going to fight?" Maggie asked, certain in the moment the words left her mouth the Kaidon would be offended.

But, Daniel just cocked his head and looked at her as Amy and Lucinda exchanged glances. He gave a single nod, making a sound deep in his chest, something like a bark or a cough, before smiling broadly, displaying rows of jagged fangs and deftly curling the wooden staff with a loud \_whoosh\_ and snapping it to his side. Given he was missing a thumb and parts of his fingers, it was impressive.

Amy crossed her arm and leaned her weight onto one hip, making a sardonic face in his direction as he took the weapon back up and continued manipulating it in his freshly bound hand, "\_In their culture, it is customary for, \_blah, blah, blahâ€¦\_" she mocked.

Daniel snorted happily, shaking his head as he hefted his weapon, tossing it and snatching it from the air before walking away.

Amy snapped her fingers loudly, getting a few of the men's attention before she pointed at 'Loram, curling her finger and indicating for him to come over, "Apparently, it's one of those unspoken macho, male \_things\_," she said, retrieving a fresh roll of cloth wrapping from a pocket and unwinding a length, "If you're visiting the Kaidon's house and he invites you to the Okona, he just challenged \_you\_," she looped the strip of binding over her head like a bonnet as she mimicked a swoon, "and us ladies get to watch."

As Iruu swaggered across the yard, Maggie looked at Lucinda with wide eyes for a second.

\_Ohâ€¦shitâ€¦seriously\_? she thought, vaguely wondering if fighting each other was a universal man trait; and pondering just how grossly lop-sided this match was about to be.

"Amy is still not completely accustomed to howâ€¦" DelÃ©on paused, drumming her fingers against her lips as if trying to think of the right word.

"\_Sexist\_ they can be," Amy said for her as 'Loram stopped short of the railing.

He narrowed his eyes at her and clicked his mandibles playfully.

"Don't click your face at me, mister," Amy chided as she took hold of his hand roughly and jerked him closer to the railing. He stepped obediently forward and snapped his mandibles defiantly at her with a laugh. Amy tisked at him before beginning to bind his hand, "See what I mean?" she teased, "There is entirely too much testosterone in the immediate vicinity," she grouched, looking directly at 'Korid as he ambled over, an okona in each hand.

Torsch passed one of the weapons to Iruu, jabbed the butt of his own into the ground with a thump, and focused his pale green eyes on Amy, "It is an honor for you that you are allowed to be here, woman," he said in a good-natured tone.

"Don't start with me, 'Korid," Amy sang, "I'm just here to make sure these two break as little as is necessary and no one drips a trail of blood through the house," she turned 'Loram's arm and inspected her work before gesturing for the other, "Besides, you have nothing left to prove to me," with that she looked from Iruu to Maggie and smirked.

What the fuck, Maggie wondered to herself, trying not to think about what was being implied as Iruu looked away at something else.

Lucinda tugged at Maggie, pulling her out of the disconcerting thoughts, as Amy and Torsch continuing to take verbal jabs at each other in the background.

The two women walked the length of the porch, "She's still mad because they won't let her play," DelÃ©on whispered.

"I can hear you," Amy hollered.

Maggie looked back over her shoulder, "She would really fight them?" she asked in disbelief.

Amy, still focused on her task, nodded and DelÃ©on shrugged, "Probably; but it is one of the few things for which Daniel will not make an exception. It is not regarded as dignified for a man to physically fight a woman purely for sport."

Whittaker rolled her eyes and made a knowing face.

"It isn't what you think," Lucinda laughed, "It is considered uncivilized and 'Korid would feel honor-bound to fight any man who would challenge or harm his wife: it would turn into a mess. Amy is just a little irritated because, for all these men have learned, they still view women as requiring protection, even if for purely moral reasons."

Maggie paused, forcing Lucinda to pull up for a second, "Amy and Major 'Korid" she couldn't bring herself to say it, the trend here was starting to get really uncomfortable.

DelÃ©on nodded and hummed to herself, swinging Whittaker around to the railing as she propped her cane and leaned against the balustrade, "I thought they hated each other," she smiled, "and I

have to admit, I wasn't convinced his intentions were polite," she looked over at Amy as the woman wound Iruu's wrist and continued to argue with 'Korid: Iruu looking very uncomfortable at being in the middle of the interaction, "Not that I needed to have worried: \_polite\_ isn't really in Amy's vocabulary. She calls Torsch on his \_crap\_, as she would say, and he deliberately provokes her. I think the two of them enjoy bickering and pushing each other's buttons."

Maggie looked down and scuffed a foot at the deck: and now this was starting to sound disturbingly\_ familiar\_.

Lucinda watched her for a few seconds then retrieved her cane, "Okona are carved from local trees," she said, changing the subject, "mostly Blonde Oak, and they are inlaid with metal, polished stone, and strips of leather for decoration and strength."

"They made the weapons themselves," Maggie prompted, happy for a diversionary topic.

"Naaco made them," DelÃ©on smiled, "Almost all of them. These men," she motioned to the yard, "are warriors. Some of them have skills when extend beyond the battlefield but most of them knew little else before being stranded here and, of necessity, had to learn to be, and do, other things," she shook her head, "They stripped bark from tree limbs and made crude implements with which to fight one another but not a one of them, bless their souls, knew how to carve traditional weapons with any \_artistic\_ skill. Naaco on the other hand, was raised for a different purpose. I'm told slaves are customarily not regarded as people: almost his entire life, Naaco has been considered clanless; his only purpose was to follow orders and stay out of the way. In his hiding from the wrath of his Master, he learned to carve things, and," Lucinda paused, smiling as Naaco walked across the lawn toward Daniel, carrying an okona of his own, "My husband can never give back what he took away from his son but he gave him something no other Sangheili on this planet can \_ever\_ have: Naaco knows that Daniel is his father," she turned to Maggie, "Daniel gave him his name and lineage back, taught him to fight, and in turn, Naaco made an okona and gave it to him as a gift," the sharp clap of wooden poles slamming against one another drew her attention.

Near the center of the lawn, Daniel and Naaco began taking careful swings at each other, their movements the kind of controlled actions Maggie recognized as a warm-up.

"Here," DelÃ©on continued, "he has value beyond that of a slave. He is recognized as the Kaidon's son and may trade his skill as an artisan if he chooses," she shrugged, "He loves shiny things. He has an entire collection of polished stone, tokens, shards of glass, random pieces of silverware and broken jewelry. The concept of personal ownership is difficult for him, most of the things he trades for a finished okona he puts back into the work."

"Allowing him to participate in this is as close to setting him free as Daniel has gotten," Amy said, walking over, "Naaco is quiet and gentle and he doesn't know how to not be a slave. Maybe one day he won't want to wear the shackles," she shrugged, "No one here would hurt him but he is still afraid and aware that he is \_different\_. Althoughâ€¦he is small and he is fast and he has wailed on Daniel a few good times. Never have I seen a man more proud to need stitches,"

she fiddled with the remainder of the bandage and tucked it into a pocket then turned to look across the lawn at Daniel and Naaco. They slowly circled each other taking long, sweeping strikes in rhythmic succession which forced Daniel through a full range of motion.

The Kaidon braced the okona against his forearm in the absence of his right hand and seemed not to notice he was missing a pretty strategic appendage for this exercise.

Iruu and Torsch had made their way to the center of the yard and began a similar, graceful task, "No one else will fight Naaco," Lucinda said absently.

"For completely non-courteous reasons," the other woman smirked, "the idea of having their asses whipped by a eunuch is just not something their man-pride could withstand, even if he is the Kaidon's son."

The three of them stood watching the four males in an elegant routine. Most of the exercise seemed well choreographed: something familiar to each of the participants. The two pairs circled each other in tandem, pausing in mock and half-hearted assaults to rove the center space of the lawn. Naaco and 'Korid appeared to be the aggressors, swatting at their opponents causing them to reach at awkward angles and twist their bodies to block hits in a repeated, graceful routine.

It wasn't until all four of them were panting for air and slicked with sweat that Naaco and Torsch each took a deliberate step away, briefly dipping their faces before waking a final, wide circle around Daniel and Iruu. The two men at the center began snapping the air menacingly and snaking their heads around, keeping a careful eye on their former opponents.

Maggie could feel the heaviness which seemed to settle into the atmosphere at this display and a part of her was certain it was deliberate.

Naaco and 'Korid continued to walk a slow, predator's circle as Daniel and 'Loram side-stepped and fought to maintain eye contact with their respective quarries. The breaking point came when Iruu and Daniel each took a blind step back and the lower joint of their legs made contact. Snarls of rage erupted from both of them and they swung, planting their feet and curling their bodies around in opposite directions, driving one end of their weapons into each other's ribs.

Maggie back pedaled from the rail and clamped both hands over her mouth to muffle a surprised squeal against the gut-turning crunch of bones breaking.

There was not a moment's pause in the men's movements as they spun and began striking at each other mercilessly: it was an elaborate dance serenaded by the sounds of snarls, the shuffle of bare feet against the ground, the clap of the weapons striking, and the occasional, sickening sound of a staff being driven against flesh and bone.

As she backed against the façade of the house, hands still clamped to her face, Whittaker half expected them to just throw down the

weapons and start tearing each other's throats out with their teeth. She knew Sangheili were fast, and had ridiculous reflexes, which made what she was seeing all the more difficult to process. It was somehow fluid yet sharp; and painfully beautiful in its savagery.

They were biting at the air as they assaulted one another, slinging saliva and blood. When there came an impasse and their weapons locked together they attempted to shove to other back with pure brute force.

Without warning, Iruu took full advantage of Daniel's inability to completely protect his face and slammed his staff into the side of the Kaidon's head with a dull \_crack\_. \_Maggie flinched for him, but Daniel moved with the force of the movement and planted the length of his okona into Iruu's side.

For a brief moment they backed from one another, screwing up their mandibles and glaring as they paced an awkward half-circle before charging forward again.

Amy peeked back over her shoulder from her place at the balustrade and gave Maggie an appraising look, "You okay?" she laughed.

Maggie looked at her and dropped her hands from her face, "How long will they \_do\_ this?" she asked in a hoarse whisper.

"As long as it takes."

"And \_you\_ \_want\_ to do this?" Whittaker heard herself squeak, looking up to see Daniel land a blow across Iruu's face, sending blood in a veil to the ground.

Amy just shrugged.

\_You're insane, \_she thought, \_they're insaneâ€¦|\_

The men stepped back from each other again and 'Loram flexed his mandibles, puffing and hissing, his eyes narrowed and his lips pulled back into a sneer as Daniel returned the fearsome expression without a sound.

Maggie wasn't sure how long they exchanged blows or how long she stood there unable to look away. They were bleeding from cuts to their faces and arms and various contusions everywhere else and they just kept after each other. No matter how uneven Whittaker may have initially thought the match to be, Daniel held his own and was clearly able to give as good as he was getting. It might have been enjoyable to watch, if not for the fact that they truly looked prepared to kill each other. The Kaidon seemed unencumbered by the loss of his hand and wielded the okona as one fully adjusted to the realities of his configuration; and Iruu did not give the man a single inch.

Daniel took advantage of an unprotected spot in Iruu's already pulverized side and drove the end of his staff into the opening. 'Loram snarled hate and twisted his body around bringing his staff down hard across the back of Daniel's neck. The incessant \_whoosh\_ and \_snap\_ of staves became a nauseous chorus to incensed growls. They were completely merciless though the pauses to circle one another became more frequent between direct assaults. Both were dirty

with sand and grass bits they had kicked up; and their clothing was stained with the creeping darkness of blood.

Iruu grumbled something in Sangheili and made a terrifying clicking sound in his chest as they backed away and circled slowly. Whatever he said made the Kaidon grin and give a bark of approval as they paced, both dripping bloody saliva.

With a guttural bay Daniel rushed 'Loram and the two locked their weapons against each other's throats with a muffled \_snap\_. As they circled and fought for control, Daniel worked a foot behind one of Iruu's and attempted to swipe it from beneath him. 'Loram's balance faltered but he caught himself, collapsing to a knee as Daniel loomed over him. Iruu shoved the other man to one side and struck him in the ribs before bracing the end of his okona against the ground. He pushed off like an oarsman, propelling himself back up to catch Daniel's okona square on the underside of his jaws.

The sound was enough to make Maggie's insides turn but Iruu simply curled himself back with the force of the blow and caught the bulk of his weight on one hand before slinging his legs over in a graceful back flip, throwing blood and dirt in an arc that outlined his movement.

When he planted his feet, 'Loram stood shaking his head and grinding his mandibles as Daniel nipped the air but didn't advance. Twisting his neck, Iruu gave his head a final jerk to one side slinging blood and a few teeth to the ground.

"Jesus," Maggie whispered.

The other onlookers never made a sound throughout the entire spectacle, not even when Daniel took a miscalculated swipe at Iruu and 'Loram brought the butt of his staff up into the Kaidon's stomach, hauling on the weapon as hard as he could.

Lucinda didn't react when her husband was lifted from his feet to hit the ground hard on his hand and knees and struggled to stand as Iruu brought his staff skyward gripped like a batter. Maggie cringed but as 'Loram reached the apex of his swing Daniel brought his weapon to bear, bracing it against his side and hip for stability, and swiped his opponent's heels knocking his feet completely out from under him. Iruu hit the ground on his shoulders with an \_oof \_and lay there prostrate as he fought for the air that had been knocked forcefully out of him and blinked up at the sky.

There was dead silence, save the distant sound of lapping waves, as Daniel got up on wobbly legs and leaned heavily against his okona as he looked down at Iruu, his twisted mandibles creased into a jagged smile.

For some reason Maggie had imagined 'Loram as a sore loser so she was a bit taken aback when he finally stopped gasping for air and slowly drew a deep breath and laughed. Daniel nodded and tossed his weapon to Naaco and offered Iruu his hand. 'Loram got to his feet, holding his stomach, and Daniel wrapped his arm over the other man's shoulder. They leaned into each other and began staggering toward the house both rumbling with laughter.

Whittaker stared without comprehension as they approached. Lucinda



grabbed her and pulled her along to the edge of the steps. Daniel paused and DelÃ©on kissed her fingertips before pressing them to his battered face. Iruu was still chuckling to himself, his eyes shimmering as he looked down at Maggie and she just gaped at him.

Amused further by the look on her face, 'Loram reached and cupped her cheek with his hand, letting the dull, filed end of his thumbnails rake against her skin as she stood watching rivulets of blood and sweat drip from his face.

"Whatâ€|" she tried as Amy walked by and patted her shoulder, "What?" she chirped again and Iruu clicked his mandibles.

DelÃ©on laughed, petting her arm, "That was my thought the first time I saw it."

Amy appeared and mashed a cloth to Daniel's face, removing it to inspect the damage before grabbing his arm and planting the stump against his face to hold the cloth in place and stepping in front of Iruu, elbowing his arm away from Maggie to blot at his face.

In the absence of the warmth of his hand, Maggie reached to touch her cheek as she turned to Lucinda with a look of total helplessness.

Naaco and Torsch walked up and began trying to assist in getting the bleeding stopped. Once she was satisfied they were not to going drip through the house, Amy stepped out of the way and the four Sangheili proceeded to lumber down the wide hall.

Whittaker allowed herself to be led inside, the tar smell of sweaty Elite lingering heavily.

DelÃ©on smiled, "Naaco and 'Korid will see to their injuries."

"Injuriesâ€|" Whittaker repeated, hearing the casual manner in which Lucinda spoke the word as an indication of how adjusted to the culture the young woman had become.

"Eh," Amy grunted, "they've got some broken bones, and they're both going to have a lot of stitches, and probably piss blood for a few days."

Maggie looked at her, \_Oh, yeah, no big dealâ€|what's a few \_more \_scars and pissing bloodâ€|\_

"What'd ya' think?" Amy asked, shoving her hands in her pockets and rocking back on her heels.

Whittaker stared at her, "I think I need a \_drink\_."

\* \* \*

><p>It was well past what counted as the midnight hour around New Saint Etienne when Whittaker stumbled her way up the stairs and down the hall to her room. Maggie found she was rather enjoying her time not getting any sleep. Somewhere between watching two grown men literally beat the bloody-hell out of each other, and staying up to

talk with Lucinda and Amy, Whittaker had managed to get sufficiently drunk.<p>

She flopped across the bed and lay there for a few minutes staring up at the ceiling feeling the world spin while her fingers and toes tingled.

\_Okay, so today no longer sucks nearly as muchâ€|Steele is so going to kick my assâ€|I'm thirstyâ€|this bed is fucking comfortableâ€|.damn, I kinda' have to peeâ€|\_

She groaned to herself and rolled over, pulling the comforter with her and half cocooning herself as her lower body dangled from the bedside, ignoring, for the moment, her body's protests.

She thought she was no longer sober enough to worry about her sanity, which was helpful. Amy had taken her seriously; but instead of the wine Maggie had enjoyed with dinner, the Major's wife had brought out a seventy-year, triple distilled scotch. And, true to form, Maggie had proceeded to down a large quantity of the amber colored wonderfulness.

It was far from being Tennessee's Finest but in a good way. Instead of like drinking diluted battery acid that tasted of bad decisions, it was light and smooth and tasted of, wellâ€|bad decisions.

Alcohol made the idea of sleeping that much more inviting, and the lowland single-malt, with all one hundred of its proofs definitely increased the probability that Whittaker could get \_some \_form of rest. However, there was just entirely too much in her head banging around in random order; sleep was not happening if she could help it because dreaming would not be pretty.

The dull haze of alcohol may have stopped the ache of personal guilt but it had done little to help her sort out everything else. If anything, \_that \_had just gotten \_worse\_ because Ambrosia II had its own social dynamic going on.

Maggie had had a privileged upbringing, sheltered from the harsh realities faced by most of the UEG colonists. Coffer Delta had been a playground for the super-rich; a haven in which she, her siblings, and her childhood peers were not exposed to war; or the suffering, loss, and general tragedies it brought. Whittaker's father had come from old bank money: the kind of wealth that ushered in the complete transition from the mix of tangible currency and electronic funds entirely to digital credits. A paternal great-great-grandfather had been the one to create the code used to secure and transfer electronic capital: his system then backed and put into use by the UEG.

Maggie's life had been full of name recognition; if you were a Whittaker, shit happened for you: there was no such thing as a closed door. Wealth always made a difference and when you were one of \_those \_Whittakers people bowed and curtsied and kissed your ass.

Intergalactic warfare against a collective alien race bent on snuffing out humanity was something that happened to \_other \_people. Then, ever the angry middle-child, Maggie had joined the UNSCMC out of spite at eighteen and entered a whole different existence.

Things that had been far enough from her life to be considered fiction suddenly became her reality. The angsty girl from a protected background found herself in the big, bad galaxy with all of its ugliness. She soon realized being one of 'those Whittakers' was like putting a giant target on her forehead. Boot had been absolute hell. And afterwards, Maggie found she was uncertain if anyone who tried to talk to her really cared anything about talking to her or were just brown-nosing because her family had more money than God.

She began drinking because she wanted to go home and she tried to make friends because she hated being lonely. Those things had been a poor combination for someone who had been so completely naïve.

She had been too ashamed of putting herself in that situation to cry rape because she wasn't entirely sure that's what had happened. She just knew she couldn't remember.

Her father had practically come unglued when she came home on leave, eight plus months pregnant. She gave birth to a baby girl a week and a half later, signed documents to confer custody to her mother, and was surgically sterilized before being discharged from the hospital.

She was barely home for a month all total, and had stayed locked in her childhood room crying uncontrollably for most of that time. Then, she woke up one day, packed her things, left the house before dawn, and took the first transport back to her duty station long before her leave was to run out.

From there she had been even more determined to make her career in the service work. Maggie had been a self-centered brat through and through, justifying what she had done by telling herself it was what was best for Shanna. No, Maggie had done what was easiest for Maggie: it was easier to walk away and pretend it never happened, it was easier to return the rejection she felt from her father instead of thinking beyond herself, and it was easier to rarely return comms, and placate her own conscience by saying someday she would be able to make it right to Shanna.

But, her homeworld had been destroyed, everyone she loved obliterated from the face of the galaxy, and the words in her father's last comm came to fruitionâ€¦

'You are not my daughter. Junior and Megan will never share an inheritance with a selfish whore like you.'

No, they wouldn't, because they were just as dead as he was and Maggie was the only heir left.

She couldn't have given two shits about the money. She just wanted her family back, the way it was before...

Maggie made Sergeant and put in for Spec Ops and fell further into a pit of personal conduct which bore little resemblance to how she saw herself. There wasn't a sexual encounter in her life which had not been clouded with alcohol; and there had been a lot of them. Whittaker found herself willing to do anything not to have to face who she was.

Well, not quite \_anything\_.

After the alliance Maggie realized she was no longer at what she considered to be the bottom of the moral barrel. There emerged an entire class of women who made a perverse game of going after alien men and comparing notes in intimate detail; and there were plenty of lonely, horny men to go around.

But, that didn't appear to be what was happening \_here\_. Lucinda and Amy \_loved\_ \_these\_ men. Interspecies relationships were by no means encouraged on Ambrosia II but they weren't prohibited either. And, Daniel had made it clear that his men were to treat human women no different than they would women of their own race.

That had gone rather poorly in the beginning, given that the first one to openly try to step across that boundary had been Major 'Korid. He misunderstood Amy's open hostilities toward him and attempted to court her as he would a Sangheili female. And, well, according to DelÃ©on, the greatest testament of affection a man could show a woman was to slay her enemies and kill those who would harm her. But, no one was trying to hurt Amy and she didn't have any enemies left...however, she really hated the rodents that had taken up in the library.

Of course, she mistook 'Korid's efforts at displaying his desire for her with an unflattering opinion of her integrity laced with mob-style threats; and Lucinda had to explain that someone leaving dead rats at your door had a \_completely\_ \_different\_ meaning for humans.

It was in trying to help Trosch sort things out, and convincing him to not be quite so over-the-top with his efforts, that Lucinda came to realize Daniel had been courting her in the only way he knew how for years. He had been a nobleman in his former life and was never expected to pursue women in his culture: he was a Swordsman, his presence was enough. But here, he had killed her enemies, brutally, sometimes publically; set her at the head of his house; and worked tirelessly to rebuild a society for her people which would at least accommodate his own.

Unable to ignore her bladder any longer, Maggie got up and staggered to the bathroom. She stuck her head in the sink and drank water straight from the faucet before attending to other needs. On the way back across the hall Whittaker stopped and looked at the painting of Mistress Herra 'Berovai. She could remember 'Loram stepping into her personal space and whispering things which she took to be innocent storytelling with deadly seductiveness. She stood there thinking about how comforting it felt to be close to him, to talk to him, and have him touch her faceâ€|

Iruu had been a Swordsmanâ€|this society had different rulesâ€|

\_Aw, shit\_â€|

## 14. Chapter 14

### Chapter Fourteen

\*\*19 October 2563

>Beta Centauri System<br>Ambrosia II  
>Keep proper New Saint Etienne  
>0315 Local<strong>

Sleep was illusive. Iruu's mind, yet again, was too troubled to focus on meditation and he was certain by now his ancestors were no longer listening, so he was not inclined to even attempt to pray.

Two of the moons hung in the sky against a splash of the galaxy as it streaked in an arc across the night. 'Loram was sitting near the low, rock retaining wall staring out at the distorted reflections as they wobbled across the ocean's black surface. Waves lightly crashed on the beach before him and tethered boats knocked against the pier further down the beachfront droning out a hollow melody.

The stitches in his face itched and his left eye was swollen. He couldn't stop tonguing the empty space where teeth use to be, and despite Amy's effort, something in his right hand was broken: given away by angry, inflamed tissue, and a dull ache. Iruu was clean and dressed again in traditional linen pants, shirtless against the warm night, with a tight binding around his ribs.

Stitches would have to come out within a day and whatever was going on in his hand would right itself completely in a good sleep cycle. It was doubtful his eye was damaged enough to show bruising against his dark skin by morning and his ribs would be back in proper order soon enough. He had little to worry about from a combat-readiness perspective: he'd done far more than what was on the morrow's agenda with far worse injuries in the past.

Iruu scratched at his stitches. It had been a long time since he had participated in the Okona. On the homeworld it was a rare event: one attended only by ranking adult men and wives, or those who hoped to be the legitimate mates, of the combatants. Here, Daniel had turned it into a nightly ritual stripped of the bulk of its ceremonial significance.

It mattered none who was victorious in the match: what mattered was how a man fought.

'Loram had engaged in his first semi-official Okona in War College. Thankfully, there had been no females in attendance then to witness him being put squarely into his place.

As a child, fighting with the staff weapon was taught to him by his uncles, like all children of Loram Keep. He had only ever sparred with boys his age and thought himself quite proficient. That was until the Commandant pulled him from evening formation in his third year in the Academy at Sudin and proceeded to beat him half to death before his peers.

Commandant 'Nesunai had been a decorated veteran long past the age at which he was eligible for active service. There had been not-so-silent musings among the cadets that he appeared ready for death at any moment. But, the old man proved a very valuable point at Iruu's expense, and it was a lesson he never forgot.

Opponents were never to be underestimated, no matter their physical condition. A man would be judged by his adversary according to how willing he was to go into the fight assuming the other man was his

better. The slightest indication that one failed to appreciate the potential for their own defeat would give a wise rival all he needed to insure victory for himself.

Of course, there had been more than one lesson in all of that. Gia had fawned over Iruu the following morning more so than ever, for all the annoyance it caused. He reported for sentry duty at the Kaidon's mansion limping, with stitches in his face and his left mandibles bound together with gauze and an eye swollen shut, and she been more of an immense tease than usual.

It was later in life that Iruu learned this was advantageous because there were certain social expectations for men fighting in the Okona. The last he had fought on the homeworld had been during an assignment from the Sudin High Counsel. He had won that one: putting a Kaidon in the dirt just hours before severing his head and spending the night with his Mistress and the following two days with his harem.

Iruu dug a rock from the sand and flicked it toward the water. Gods, there was so much blood on his hands. Even if he could ever go home he would be fortunate to survive more than an hour: there were entirely too many bloodlines who had lost women because they bore his sons, too many young men and children slaughtered because of whose lineage they shared.

The sound of tuneless humming pulled him from the rim of a well dredged mire of personal regret. He could smell the aroma of alcohol on the ocean breeze and knew by the collection of other scents that Maggie was out there long before he caught sight of her.

Whittaker slowly strolled along the sand high on the beachhead, letting her hand graze the low rock retaining wall. Her head had all but stopped swimming and she was relatively steady on her feet, in her own opinion.

She had sat in her room pecking at her data pad for as long as was sufficient to keep her mind occupied before finding herself treading the line between sleep and awake. The dim collection of dreams that had threatened at the periphery was enough to make her pace the floor losing a battle against tears until she couldn't stand being in the room another minute.

In honesty, she had decided to go walk around to get further away from where she assumed Iruu to be. Despite the hour she hadn't dared step out onto the balcony for fear of finding him there or losing her mind completely and knocking on his door.

Maggie was at the point of inner torture where she just wanted to escape. She was drunk, but as the effects waned, it wasn't enough anymore. Alcohol had always given her the illusion of control, just enough to kill inhibitions and quash guilt at wanting a little temporary, physical solace.

In the wake of a sobering mind all of the what-ifs of the past had come back and her brain was a pit of images too dreadful to bear on her own. Faced with loneliness at a time when she was usually getting fucked into oblivion or unconscious...or both, Whittaker didn't know what to do other than seek the comfort of another person. Only, she wasn't delusional enough to think it was a human she wanted comfort from and she was sober enough to be afraid of herself.

As she approached, mentally cursing, Iruu looked up at her with his tongue sticking out awkwardly between his mandibles and she couldn't help but laugh despite her misery.

"You got your ass kicked," she croaked.

"That was not the point of the exercise," he rumbled.

"Yeah, I know," she sighed, plopping down in the sand next to him with resignation, "It was so you could prove you are all that is maleâ€|and \_blah, blah, blah\_â€|" she slurred.

Iruu huffed a laugh, shaking his head.

"Ya' know, when I want to look badass I try to keep my teeth in my face."

He shrugged, "They will grow back."

"Really?" she asked, looking up at him, seeing the line of stitches along the underside of his jaws.

'Loram gazed down at her, "Yes."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully and looked out at the dark ocean, then leaned her head against the warmth of his arm. The feel of his skin against her cheek was more a mockery than a relief: she was so far down the hole of self-hatred she didn't feel deserving of comfort. Whittaker knew she was still too drunk and she needed to get up and just walk away.

But, she couldn't. Instead, Maggie trailed one hand along Iruu's arm, mindful not to brush the bruised edge of a crescent-shaped gash.

"You are intoxicated," he said carefully.

Maggie nodded, "Yes, I am."

"Why?"

She scoffed, wrapping her arms around his bicep, "\_Because I can\_", she said miserably, tucking herself up close to him.

Iruu clicked his mandibles in irritation, "Gods, you remind me of," he paused then added softly, "\_someone\_."

She knew from the sound of his voice it wasn't intended to be a flattering comparison, but she didn't care.

"Who was she?" she asked, just wanting him to keep talking.

Slowly, 'Loram snaked his neck to look down at her. She had her face buried against his arm, her hair sticking up in tufts of silver in the moonlight.

"He?" she prodded, turning to look up at him.

"No," he said, his mandibles creasing in to a smile, "My tastes have

never run in \_that\_direction," he said.

Maggie gave a tiny smirk though her eyes swam with tears, "So, who was \_she\_?"

'Loram furrowed his brow ridges. She looked absolutely as miserable as he felt. Dressed in standard gray pants but with only the black cotton shirt, he could see how small and frail she was, sitting next to him, clinging to his arm.

Heaving a sigh, Iruu tilted his head to look up at the stars. As he leaned lazily back against the rock wall Whittaker released her grasp and curled up next to him, cuddling up in the crook of his arm, resting her head on his chest.

For the longest time she thought he was done talking. Maggie tried to make this be enough: leaning into his silent warmth as she toyed with raised scars that crossed his bare hide, listening to the rhythmic sound of his hearts as she watched tiny, side-walking crustaceans skitter back and forth at the shoreline.

"It was youthful absurdity," he finally said in a low rumble, shifting to stretch his legs out before wiggling the sand from between his hooved toes, "She was my Kaidon's daughter," he said bitterly.

"That sounds...not good."

He hummed in response.

It had been fun while it lasted: the constant teasing by a daughter of nobility; her incessant verbal sparring; and all the ways she would find to tell him, in very few words, she would have him, not just as her mate, but as her \_husband\_, one day.

But, Gia 'Sudin came of age in the year before Iruu, and just as he knew they would, her interests turned from him to the numerous adult males who were able to properly court her.

'Loram had almost three years to bask in her attention. Then, he silently endured standing quietly like a good little cadet and watching as warriors came and went from the mansion, knowing \_exactly\_ \_why\_ they were there.

As much as he tried to convince himself that her previous flirtations had never mattered, and that this was how it was supposed to be, that she deserved someone who could properly pursue her, Iruu was intensely jealous.

When he and his fellows had entered their fourth and final year at War College they had been relieved of their duties outside the academy to allow for more rigorous training. Iruu had been grateful, the exercises which followed leaving his mind little time for thoughts of Gia. He honestly thought the hardened members of senior cadre were trying to kill them. And, they were, so 'Loram manage to pull himself from the fog of heartbreak and back into the arena of training out of the sheer need to \_survive\_.

They were driven for days without food or rest, denied the modesty of clothing, stripped of their weapons, beaten into unconsciousness, and



tossed like garbage into the outlands.

Looking back, Iruu understood the objective was to return to the academy alive, to force the boys to put the knowledge of the three years previous to practical use. Some youths died during the course of the exercise but Iruu and most of the class lived; and when that phase of training came to an end select cadets were allowed to resume duties outside the academy grounds.

It wasn't until he donned his ceremonial armor and prepared to set off with his brothers that 'Loram thought about Gia again. Grinding his mandibles, he had relieved the outgoing guard and assumed his position with the others. But it was well over a week before he saw her.

A hateful part of him had hoped Kaidon Cero 'Sudinai had grown weary of his Mistress and had her assassinated and sent her daughter back to whatever miserable, hell-hole her mother's bloodline spawned from.

Jealousy and hurting pride aside, he did not realized how much he missed at least seeing her until the moment she wandered through the front gate. He was hit with a bit of guilt for his unkind thoughts because he knew she was not to blame for his foolishness: she was above his social class and he never had any right to her.

But, as she drew near, Iruu had realized something was wrong.

She didn't carry herself with all the pride of a youthful noble; her robes looked faded and unwashed; and she was too thin. Certainly her belly should have been round with pregnancy by this time and her cheeks pink with the excitement of a woman bearing her first heir.

Not once did she look at \_any \_of them: she simply made her way slowly up the front flagstone walk, face turned to the ground, and pushed through the great doors without a word.

It bothered Iruu more than it should have.

When the boys were relieved by the oncoming guard, and began making their way down the main city street to the academy grounds, he had seen Gia sitting on the side lawn in the sun as a few Unggoy lounged in the shade of a tall tree. The Kaidon's daughter was pulling flowering weeds from the ground and tangling them together into a necklace. The entire scene was incongruent with anything Iruu understood. He couldn't imagine why Gia would be with the Unggoy and not \_Sangheili\_ slaves and her own maid servants.

His fellow cadets practically came out of their skins when he turned from the side path, scaled a drooping willow tree, and sprang to land on the other side of the fence.

"Iruu, \_what are you doing\_?" Heth hissed.

Curling his neck back to the other young men, Iruu snapped his mandibles and snorted, "Go on without me."

"Are you \_crazy\_?" Ro offered, looking up at the towering mansion, "'Sudinai will \_kill \_you."

J'rek nodded in agreement, "And if you are late for sword trainingâ€|"

"I said \_go\_," he growled, wheeling to clench his fists and take a threatening step back toward them.

The boys raised their hands and slowly began making their way, casting concerned glances over their shoulders.

Satisfied they would keep moving, Iruu turned back to see the Unggoy ambling away, uninterested in whatever trouble this felonious display of trespassing could bring them. 'Loram strolled over to where Gia was still seated, continuing to weave the gnarled stems of yellow and brown flowers together. She didn't acknowledge his presence when his shadow fell over her.

He watched her for a few moments taking in her thin frame and the unkempt pallor of her skin. Her red-rimmed eyes were focused on the task in her hands and he could see her working at her mandibles and scrunching at her features as if it took effort not to look at him.

Folding to the ground, Iruu removed the nickel and red ceremonial helmet and placed it between his feet. Gia wrapped her lower mandibles over her upper in an expression of concentration as she tied the ends of her creation together. Turning to Iruu, she looped it over his head and brought it down around his neck, letting her hands rest against the polished surface of his chest plate.

He quietly watched her face until she finally tipped her emerald eyes to him, not removing her hands from his armor, "He is right, you know?" she whispered, her voice hoarse, "Uncle Cero will kill you if he catches you here."

Before he could take a breath to speak his present lack of concern for such things, Gia threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck, weeping. Iruu tensed in surprise and sat frozen for a few seconds before returning the embrace and resting his chin on top of her head.

"Gia," he finally whispered, his voice betraying his concern, "What has happened to you?"

She sniffed and pulled away from him, shoving at his chest before wiping at her eyes with angry fists. She leveled her piercing gaze directly into his and rose from the ground, "Don't you mean, what has \*\_not\_\* happened to me?" she cried, motioning to the flat of her stomach.

Iruu caught sight of the dark faces of Sangheili servant-staff peeping around a far corner of the mansion wall. Narrowing her eyes, Gia followed his gaze and turned to hiss classlessly at the nosey young women.

"Gia," he whispered in admonition, rising to take her arm.

She grabbed hold of his hand before he could reach her. She snatched his helm from the ground then pulled at him, entreating him to follow. He complied, allowing himself to be whirled around and led

across the side lawn.

"Where are weâ€|" he tried to ask.

"\_Shush\_," she snarled, pulling him along the mansion wall and around the back corner.

The ground sloped downward and a worn path in the grass lead to a short, wide door recessed into the stone wall. A few waddling slaves jumped out of the way with frightened squeals as they approached and Gia led Iruu inside.

It was dark and smelled of methane and Unggoy. Both Sangheili had to duck their necks to make their way along the wide hall. A few slaves hooted in surprise and retreated at seeing them.

They made their way down winding halls until Gia pushed through another door and yanked Iruu into a small room cluttered with mops and brooms, buckets and dust pans, and cleaning solvents and wads of dirty linens.

"Woman, are you mad?" he panted, realizing if found here, with \_her\_, he was going to be \_castrated \_before his death.

"Yes, I am," she snapped back, lugging the door closed.

"Why did you bring me here?" Iruu insisted, discomfort rising into his voice as he watched her turn the lock.

"\_Because I can,\_" she said, forcing bluster into her voice as she sank to the floor.

He watched her push dirt around with the toes of her sandals for a few moments, "Gia, what in the name of the Forerunners isâ€|"

"They are taking me to a \_doctor\_, " she hissed.

"\_What?\_" Iruu growled.

Gia crossed her arms and sniffed, "Uncle Cero says it is the only way to know for sureâ€|" her words trailed off into nothing.

Iruu cocked his head, "Know what?" he huffed.

She looked at him as tears broke free of her eyes, "\_To know if I will ever bear children\_," she screeched before wrapping her arms around her legs, burying her face against her knees with a dejected sob.

Iruu seethed. He could imagine no greater humiliation than what \_that \_examination would entail.

With fists clenched he stepped toward her and to his horror, she recoiled from him, pushing herself against the door and defensively raising her arms over her head with a terrified wail. As the sleeves of her robes gaped away Iruu could see bruises in varying shades down her forearms. The black and blue marks were clearly of finger and handprints against the light brown of her skin.

His knees turned to mush and he sank to the floor, gently reaching to

touch her, letting his knuckles brush the wounds on her skin, "What in nine hells \_happened\_?" he choked.

Gia hiccupped and lowered her arms a fraction, peeping at him from beyond her protective barrier, "Did you not hear what I said?" she spat, expecting his anger.

Narrowing his eyes Iruu responded softly, "Did you not hear what I asked?"

Through a countenance darkened with complete sadness, the corners of Gia's mandibles twitched in a smile.

She shook her head, "It was his rightâ€|" she tried to begin.

Iruu snorted angrily.

"\_He was a Swordsman of Hakkamr\_, " she said before looking away, her features screwing up as she squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, "He was mean to meâ€| and I have not conceived; Uncle Cero lets himâ€|" she looked at Iruu with glassy eyes, "No other men will have me nowâ€|and I cannot refuse him and he is \_mean\_, Iruuâ€|" she clamped her hands over her mouth as her eyes went wide with sudden realization and she mumbled through her fingers, "\_You will never marry me\_."

Allowing himself to be taken by a barren woman would mean Iruu would never have heirs of his own. If truly unable to conceive she would at best be a servant and he could never increase his social status being married to her. This was the only circumstance in which an eligible male was permitted to refuse to marry a female.

He brushed at the side of her face, settling himself on the floor and collecting her in his arms, "Of course I will," he murmured into the side of her face.

She sobbed, "It would not be rightâ€|your father was a Swordsman of Varlemâ€|"

For all the playful banter it turned out Gia \_had \_intended to make good on all her insufferable teasing, enough so she had looked at the record of his lineage. She wasn't supposed to tell him what she found, but she wasn't supposed to be spilling embarrassing secrets to a cadet in the Kaidon's basement either.

"Gia, I am yours," he choked, nuzzling her cheek with his snout.

It had never been his intention to...but Gia hadn't needed encouragement. The moment his head bunted against hers she grabbed hold of his face, softly tangling her mandibles in his, and kissing him deeply as she pushed him to the floor, not that he put up a struggle. As much forbidden excitement as there had been at seeing her eagerly begin to shed her clothing, Iruu found himself completely undone by the bruises that wound across her body, the scratches that fell in hashed scabs across her slim shoulders, and the lines of bite marks that wound around the base of her throat. He briefly thought of stopping her, thinking that Gia was not in her right mind and he did not wish to take advantage of her that way. But she deftly unfastened his armor faster than even he could, all the while issuing small whimpers of desperation and soft pleas for him not to hurt

her.

Maggie felt Iruu sigh heavily as he craned his chin against his chest, "I was late for sword training," he grumbled.

Whittaker looked at him with a wry smile.

"I was not allowed to serve in any ceremonial positions for my tardiness following that. They would not let me leave the academy grounds until after graduation," he ground his mandibles, "five months away."

He grew quiet and closed his eyes. Maggie watched him for a few seconds, the slits of his nostrils flared and the muscles of his neck flexed as he clenched his jaws. She reached and ran her palm down the length of his face. Iruu bumped her arm with his snout, turning into her touch.

"When all the other young males were out trying to impress females and joining the Covenant, I took the first transport to the State of Hakkamr," he took hold of her arm and pulled it to his chest, "The man who hurt Gia was not the kind for which even his kindred would mourn his passing, his seed hardly worth avenging on the hide of a young girl. I followed him and," Iruu clicked his mandibles, "I caught him in his back doorway and ran a blade through his neck."

Maggie bit down on her bottom lip, "'The greatest testament of affection a man can show a woman...'"

"I returned to Sudin but," his expression dropped as he looked out at the ocean, "when I asked after her one of the servants told me Gia's name was forbidden to be spoken. The old woman said it was to be as if she never lived. I walked the streets until nightfall and snuck in over the fence and went to the Unggoy entrance. I grabbed the first pitiful creature I could find and demanded to know what was going on. He told me," Iruu touched his hand to his face and worried at his temples, "'Sudinai would not even allow her to be a servant in his house. He sold her to a merchant from Nustaadâ€|he made her a slave."

"Because she couldn't have children?" Maggie whispered.

"Women who are unable to conceive are regarded as damaged. Most are allowed to serve in the households of their birth or of their clan. If from a poor lineage, they may be sold into slaveryâ€|but, Gia was the Kaidon's daughter. He had no use of the money she would bring. And Nustaadâ€|" he ground his mandibles, "is a den of sanctioned debauchery and she was so beautiful."

"You went after her," Whittaker smiled.

"Of course I did," he snapped, "I was prepared to steal her. We would be fugitives and live in the damned outlands if that's what it took."

The cadence of his speech was not lost on Maggie: Iruu recognized now how silly that plan had been.

He slumped heavily against the rock wall, mandibles twitching, "But

when I found her," he said, closing his eyes tightly against the thought, "she did not want anything to do with me. I murdered that old warrior because of what he did to her, and she was content to..."

"She wouldn't go with you?"

Iruu shook his head, "She laughed in my face," he looked toward the sky and puffed out a breath, "She could have more men than she could take. That had become her life and it was what she insisted she wanted," he shook his head, "so I left her there\_."

Maggie cupped a hand over her mouth.

Iruu shifted, wrapping an arm around her waist and turning to nuzzle the top of her head. Whittaker leaned into him, draping one arm across his chest and lacing her fingers in his opposite hand as she watched the gentle rise and fall of his breathing in silence as the moments ticked past.

She didn't have words. She wanted to but even if she could find them in her drunken haze she knew he would hear them as empty and hypocritical.

"I secured my place among nobility before I joined the Covenant," he said into her hair and Maggie closed her eyes, "If she would not have me as her husband, I made sure no other woman could," she felt the muscles in his chest tense, "I \_do not\_ understand how a man could love his daughter so little."

Female heirs were \_different\_. Even if they were unable to contribute to the bloodline, they were still \_women\_; they were to be treasured and protected, not thrown into prostitution.

Whittaker turned her head and drew a ragged breath, opening her eyes to see the ocean through a blur of tears. When she spoke, her voice was small with anguish, "Because, to \_him\_, she wasn't his daughter anymore."

He had never considered himself incredibly perceptive when dealing with the words of women, and as a Swordsman, in his \_other \_life, he never had to be. There was generally little \_talking \_involved. However, he recognized Maggie's words as coming from personal experience.

Whittaker struggled to choke back her emotions but she was too tired and still too drunk. A few tears broke free and slid down her cheeks to pool against his chest, "It's easy to get thrown away when you're a disappointment."

She choked on the words and turned to hide her face against him as she embraced him tightly.

He sat there for a few moments, holding her, feeling her ragged breathing in his grasp, twiddling his mandibles in the soft of her hair as it tickled his nose; unsure of what to do. He had not intended to make her cry.

"Maggie," he whispered.

She turned to look up at him, her lips grazing the end of his snout. It was wrong in so many ways, for so very many reasons, but in that moment, he desperately wanted to comfort her.

Oh, hells, no he didn't: there was nothing noble about what he wanted.

Never in his life had 'Loram felt more frustrated by a desire. He wasn't even sure how he would go about trying to \_kiss \_her let alone anything else. She didn't have mandibles and the last thing he wanted was for her to think he was trying to bite her face off...and...

Iruu brushed his muzzle against her nose and, before he could stop himself, he turned and licked a line of tears from her cheek.

His tongue prickled Maggie's skin. Through the fog of drunkenness she vaguely thought it was kind of like getting a tentative kiss from a giant cat. She felt her pulse jump as he continued to gently lap his way soothingly down her face and her mind eventually made the connection and she realized that's \_exactly\_ what he was doing.

There were no longer any thoughts as to whether or not she could be that kind of girl. Maggie slid her hands up his broad chest and over the fine scales of his shoulders as she turned into him, letting her head fall back and exposing more of her neck for him to hungrily kiss knowing shouldn't have wanted him to comfort her this way.

As 'Loram lightly nipped at the skin of her jaw and began working slowly back down her neck, Whittaker drug her nails across his shoulders and he gave a low growl as he drew himself up and twisted to pushed her into the sand beneath him. This was an affection he had never stopped to realize he was starving for; and with her hands roaming his bare skin he found himself unable to contain a lusty purr.

"Iruu," her voice quaked.

How long had it been since a woman said his name \_like that\_?

He could feel her trembling and smell the sweet aroma of her arousal mixed with the scent and bitter taste of alcohol as he licked every exposed inch of her he could: her face, her neck, her arms, her hands. There was sand in the way everywhere but he didn't care. He reveled in the way she writhed beneath him, seeking position, clawing at him for more, and when that wasn't enough he tugged the hem of her shirt from her pants and, running his hands along her bare skin, proceeded to nuzzle and tend to her exposed abdomen.

He wasn't exactly sure how this was going to work and he hoped humans weren't into anything \_peculiar\_, but when his mouth wound across her clothing and settled again against her small throat, he let his tongue glide slowly against the soft flesh, tearing a wanton moan from her...he damn well \_knew \_he didn't care: he would do whatever she asked.

It had been longer than he cared to calculate since he had been with a woman and it took so little for his body to be painfully eager.

Maggie felt his breath, hot against her neck. He was being so gentle though clearly struggling blindly as he nipped at her skin and tried to figure out just how the hell the closure to her pants worked. This was not right: it was all wrong. She didn't understand this. She didn't want someone to be nice to her, that's not how a life sentence is supposed to work. She didn't want his delicate, forgiving touches.

A blaze of unfamiliar terror streaked through her and she drew herself up against him, pinning his hand against her stomach and garnering from him a discontented, frustrated groan.

Holy shit, she couldn't do this. Yes, yes she could. No, hurt me damn you, I know you damn well can!\_

"Iruuâ€¦pleaseâ€¦" she panted through gritted teeth, running her hands along his arms, thinking to push him away but pulling him closer instead. Son of a bitch, he was hard and ready, and...Mother. Of. God.

He growled deep in his chest as he pushed his hips against hers, agitated by the barrier of clothing as he nuzzled her neck, her cheek, her ear, "Yes," he rumbled breathlessly, anything, sweet, merciful Ancestors, anything! He had never in his life had to beg, but he was fully prepared to do so if that was what she wanted to hear.

"Pleaseâ€¦" she heard her own voice tangled with uncertainty and need and every miserable part of her wanted to scream against the exquisite rhythm of his soft but demanding movements.

Iruu ruffled his mandibles into her hair and grazed his tongue against the shell of her ear, "Anything," he found himself murmuring shamelessly.

A needy sob tore from her as she struggled to surface from the drowning pool of longing and scotch. She couldn't accept the compassion in his touches; she couldn't use him like this; she didn't care if he wanted to pretend she was someone he cared about, she was use to men not remembering her name; but she wasn't Gia, she couldn't let him think she was somehow deserving of his gentle, indulgent, mercy.

As his mandibles grazed her chin and she felt the rough of his tongue find the soft rim of her lips, from the part of her that ached to be used and resented being caressed, she found the one word she could never be sure she had ever said in her life, "Stop," she whimpered.

'Loram froze. In that moment, he would have sworn even his hearts obeyed her word. He had always been an opportunistic knave but he had never forced himself on a woman: his right as a noble or not.

Iruu pushed back onto his knees as Maggie wriggled away from him and struggled to find her footing in the loose sand.

"Maggie, Iâ€¦" he tried but she turned back with murder in the drunken, murky depths of her eyes and held up her trembling



hands.

"Don't," she sniffed, before turning to hurry clumsily away.

## 15. Chapter 15

### Chapter Fifteen

\*\*19 October 2563

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>Beta Centauri System<br>Orbit over Ambrosia II  
><strong>_**UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy**____**  
><strong>_**Time Reference Unavailable**
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Hilda focused herself on remaining outside of Signe's perception. It wasn't a particularly difficult task, given his advanced state of psychological deterioration. Jealousy had become a detrimental phase in his progression through rampancy. There were too many fragmented, schizoid bits; and they continued to break down further, failing to recognize each other as part of same AI. Segments attacked each other and vied for the information whole, and Signe's primary operating system simply began consuming them: his matrix unwittingly beginning to cannibalize itself.

Having reached the parameters of his intelligence; analyzed and compartmentalized information to the point of forgetting to function; and stabilized into a cycle of consuming his fragments with all the tranquility of a Buddhist monk, Signe had reached the limits of his madness. It was the most disturbing example of a Metastable state Hilda could imagine.

Signe was destroying himself; creating data voids in his own processors; mindlessly gnawing himself into nothing. Whatever was left of the cloned system had become stoic against its own destruction, too weary to fight off the original.

This was beneficial in many ways, Signe was too busy attacking himself to pay Hilda any mind, though she was not about to announce her presence, and he had not yet noticed the sub-fragment had commandeered the communications system planetside.

Signe was on the cusp of realizing he was now capable of hard light transcendence. The AI was once again the greatest threat to overall mission success in retrieving Jay alive. Should he accept his life-cycle was quickly drawing to an end, and accurately assess that his natural death would come long before he could have the satisfaction of watching Jay die, he was fully able to materialize a tactile form with enough substantial mass to kill the doctor himself.

\_Deoxy's \_internal atmosphere was completely off, not that the Flood infected crew was harmed by the effects. Temperatures hovered at 45 degrees Celsius and Hilda was thankful her perception of smell was nothing more than an instrumental analysis of odor spectra. Gravity fluctuated and lights operated intermittently driving the Flood mad at times; and Jay had perched herself on the bridge in the Captain's chair.

She was alive in the loosest sense of the word. Hilda could only hope the genomic retardation protocols Jay had written, and Signe's

sub-fragment had handed over, actually worked. There was very little supporting data and the entire process had been abandoned long before Jay was forced to pack up her little operation. Still, Hilda ran through the data again wondering if it was even necessary toâ€|

"Hilda," it was an illusionary auditory sensation, much like a thought, or a psychological nudge, not an actual acoustic vibration.

Hilda paused her musings; recognizing Signe's obedient sub-fragment.

"It is morning down there," he said.

"Yes, it is," she answered gently.

The sub-fragment gave a low, whine of fear, "Will itâ€|be painful?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>19 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Ambrosia II<br>New Saint Etienne/ Keep Proper  
>0530 Local<strong>

Maggie thrashed against dreamy apparitions: the scent of her mother's perfume on the ocean breeze, her sister's laughter, her daughter's giggle; the crackling pop of an energy sword, the repetitive hissing click of an enraged Sangheili; screams, the overpowering aroma of burned hair and flesh, her daughter's blue eyes, blood splattered walls, guts covering the floor, an Elite smiling with orange blood stained fangs.

She knew she was falling asleep. Too tired to stop it and too terrified to go forward, Maggie was caught in the apnea of exhaustion: part of her brain aware and the other part was in the land of the subconscious. Finally, jerking awake and swinging into empty space, Whittaker fell to the floor. Gasping, she sprang up into a crouch, vertigo tilting the world at a sharp angle forcing her back down onto her stomach with a groan. She lay there in the darkness, cradling her head against her arms until her stomach stopped turning and the images receded.

Slowly, she unfolded her arms and moved to peer at the face of her watch seeing the numbers but not even bothering to attempt the math to figure out what time it was. The suns were finally starting to come up: that's all that mattered.

Whittaker had done all she could to force herself to stay awake in the final hours of the night but had begun losing the battle somewhere along the way. After making it back to the house, Maggie had stood in a scalding shower watching sand swirl down the drain before soaking in the tub until the water became cold. From there it was a standard battle against drowsiness as she pecked at her data pad and paced the floor.

Having spent the better part of her personal time during the last thirteen years in a drunken stupor, Maggie's tolerance for alcohol had become impressive; but she still felt as though her guts had been

wrung out and a jack hammer was going off in her skull.

Assuming the low-crawl-of-shame, Whittaker pulled herself along the plush carpet until she reached her bug out bag. Taking hold of a loose strap, she reeled the gear in before floundering at the closures; her fingers picking along the surface as she closed her eyes against nausea and drew up a visual map in her head. Eventually she located the desired side flap and rummaged blindly.

Toothbrush, toothpaste , \_going to need those later,\_ mouthwash, chapstickâ€|gum, \_hallelujah. \_

Aside from water and coffee, Maggie had found cinnamon-ginger gum to be a post-drinking necessity. A little something she had located at one of those tucked-away, all-natural, hippie stores Earthside, it was less candy and more a home-remedy that worked well for hangover symptoms in general. It would do nothing for the pounding in her head, but she had acetaminophen and altrexedol somewhere in her bag for that.

She unwrapped two pieces of gum and dropped them in her mouth as she lay looking bleary-eyed up at the ceiling, crumpling the wrappers and poking them in whatever pocket she could reach without looking. The pale light of morning was just beginning to illuminate the room, throwing soft blue through the windows as Whittaker rolled herself up and sat in the middle of the floor, chewing, collecting her resolve.

Eventually she found the determination to get up and get herself in some semblance of order. She climbed into a fresh uniform and made her way to the head to splash her face with water, make her hair behave itself, and drink from the faucet after tossing a few mild pain-relievers and an alcohol blocker in her mouth. Both drugs were common, over-the-counter tablets which could be found in just about every Marine's personal gear. The second was experimental at best, intended to be taken \_prior\_ to alcohol consumption to keep the imbiber from feeling the effects at all. But, Maggie never really saw the fun in that.

Walking back to and through her room, Maggie pulled open the door and stepped out onto the balcony, taking a deep breath of morning air.

As she stepped to the railing she could see bright streaks of blue and purple as the easterly sunrise chased away the darkness. A few winking stars still glittered near the ocean horizon and a powdery moon hung just beyond the balcony's eave as the early morning light backlit the house. She stood with her elbows propped against the balustrade, head hung as birds sang their good-morning to the suns.

Iruu sat against the deck, leaned near his own door in the failing shadows, watching her silently. Unable to quiet his mind, 'Loram had made use of the restlessness by transcribing his assessment of the planet in memorandum to Sangheili Military Commander 'Vadum. This was not a requirement of his assignment, the diversion to Ambrosia II having little bearing on human foolishness with manipulating the Flood; but it was something 'Loram felt compelled to do.

There was little doubt in Iruu's mind having knowledge the planet was

under the stewardship of former Legion Master 'Berovai would be essential to whatever aspirations Shipmaster 'Torev and his Special Operations Sangheili had of making a run at retrieving the lost legion. It was partially out of wishing the decision to be made with full disclosure, and partly his way of appeasing his conscience that he had taken all steps to insure this existence would not be disrupted unnecessarily.

The alliance was still on shaky ground and if 'Vadum and the Arbiter balked at the notion of starting a war with Covenant defectors there was the possibility the UNSC would back off for the sake of maintaining a peaceful coalition. As far as 'Loram was concerned there was nothing here to recover. Helping the UNSC flex their galactic might on behalf of UEG objectives would not be a cause worth sacrificing warriors.

Once Maggie had disappeared into the night, Iruu had collected his scattered thoughts and determined to regain his bearing. He had become too comfortable in the presence of humans; having interacted with them to the extent he was beginning to think in English instead of his native Shangeili dialect; and allowing himself to become shamefully preoccupied with personal interests. Though it had been a pleasant diversion, this was a mission with things left to be done and not a retreat from his life.

However, the moment Maggie stepped out onto the balcony all such thought fell away and Iruu was faced with the reality that the past hours' undertakings had been little more than a distraction from his confusion. It was far more comforting to assume humans were simply odd and immerse himself back in official duties than it was to dwell on what he could have done wrong.

Seeing Whittaker as she stood there was far more painful to his pride than he cared to admit. He had been a Swordsman since he was fifteen; even combined with the eleven years since his bloodline had been disgraced he had been counted among nobility four times longer than not. While familiar with prolonged periods of celibacy during the Great War: refusal was not something he had any frame of reference for.

Then again, it wasn't as though he was a young man. While certainly not old by Sangheili standards, 'Loram was beyond the age at which courting females even in the most perfunctory of ways was necessary. Had they not been executed, his sons and, by now, their subsequent progeny, would be seeing to the bloodline. Not that sex was merely an obligation, but it was certainly something which took considerable care for genetic diversity and was somewhat reduced to a sense of duty for most. However, once a male had exceeded his prime and was no longer viable as a breeder, certain constraints were no longer an issue.

Nobles were never permitted to be taken in marriage and only males of the ruling class were allowed to acquire a Mistress. Sangheili of sufficient age could be joined as bond mates if they wished. Though such arrangements were civil in nature and had no legal standing, unlike the others, they were born purely of mutual affection and were commonly respected as closed unions.

Iruu realized he had again, in the space of less than a day, forgotten he was a disgraced man no honorable woman would wish to

share her bed or her body with.

It was all the more painful because he felt, at times, little more than a political pawn in the Arbiter's feud with the High Council of Sanghelios; but there was a part of him which saw his exile on Earth as the closest equivalent to the life he would have had if not condemned. He had no right to be angry in all fairness, his depth of personal loneliness aside.

'Taham had been the one to approach him with the Council's decision once Earth was secure of the Flood and communications were reestablished in earnest with the homeworld. Iruu read the Order of Judgment which proclaimed the unanimous verdict to incept the Decree of Preclusion on the House of Varlem the year previous.

Condemned through the lineage of his father and having not exhausted his usefulness to die in combat 'Loram lived to know his mates, his children and their mates, all subsequent generations, and his mother had been executed. The Decree was a merciless shaming, one of the few which came with forbearance against ritual suicide demanding execution.

Halls of Record across Sanghelios had been scoured for traces of the Varlem lineage and every descendant killed. The city-state bearing its name was burned to the ground and the embers tilled with salt.

Iruu had laid down his swords, fully prepared in the wake of bereavement to submit to his sentence. But, the Ambassador had refused to accept his armament. At the Arbiter's request and 'Vadum's approval, 'Loram was to be promoted from Field Master to Command Officer. Talk of an official alliance and offers from the humans of asylum meant an obligatory force of Sangheili would be positioned on the planet to render aid; and Iruu was to assume the position of Commandant.

Whittaker straightened, stretching her arms over her head as she yawned and turned, startling when she saw 'Loram sitting there.

She watched him for a few seconds, seeing him slowly grinding his mandibles as he did his best not to look at her. Maggie had wanted to think morning would come and this mission would get the hell over with and life would go back to normal and she could just forget all about Ambrosia II and Double Helix and Doctor Jay andâ€|

Iruu tipped his face away and a part of her wanted to die inside. In that moment she knew she couldn't just ignore everything and pretend nothing had happened, as wonderful as that would have been. He was miserable and she knew it was her fault. It would have been easy to ball up and be angry and think he should just \_grow up\_ and get over it, but Maggie knew there was more to it than that. There were different rules in his culture and he didn't understand and his playfulness had been her escape from sorrow. She had gotten caught up in the forbidden excitement of pushing at him not stopping to think there could be very real consequences to leading him onâ€|not that she had really intended to do \_that\_.

\_And, just what \_were\_ you intending to do? \_Maggie tried to ignore the rebuke.

Whittaker was accustomed to being a means to a sexually frustrated end and was not at all prepared to anything other than that. She kind of, actually liked Iruu, as a person...as perverse as she still thought that was; and knowing he was capable of being kind to her in more than one way made it worse.

Maggie saw herself as a murderer. In her mind it was just that simple. She had joined the UNSCMC after a bitter argument with her father. John Martin Sr. had had a fit when end of term grades had rolled in and his middle child had fared poorly in every freshman subject. It was at college that Maggie first became aware that there was a war out there, a for real war, with people dying, not just some 'little rebel uprising'. She had been disgusted that an entire colony could be so self-absorbed as to collectively think, and raise their children to think, that fighting for the sake of the species was 'low class'. It was as if it was something not even worth mentioning\_.

Whittaker went to the Colonial Authority; found someone with recruitment powers; and signed her name about fifty-zillion times. She didn't want to spend her life being a stuck-up snob pretending everyone else's sacrifices had no meaning; she wanted to be part of something bigger than she was, something that actually mattered\_.

The sting of her father's haughty, 'I can't believe a child of mine\_ would do such a thing', uppity outrage was quashed by her mother's silent approval. That had been little consolation at the time. Maggie had briefly considered enlisting under her mother's maiden name, but she felt that would have made her an even bigger target. Evelyn Shaw-Whittaker was wealthy in her own right; raking in substantial royalties with every translight engine produced even after the proceeds were filtered through numerous heirs. And, while there was a chance people might not recognize the significance of her father's family name, there was little in hell they wouldn't know her mother's.

When she had shown back up at her parent's doorstep after just over a year in service, round and waddling, all through her father's ranting her mother had sat petting her hand with a half smile on her face. Whittaker's mom had spoken to her about her plan and it was before Shanna was born that Maggie decided to sign custody over to her mother. Again, her father was livid, wanting very much for Maggie to have to live with her mistakes. But in the end, Evelyn had convinced her husband to deal with it\_ because no grandchild of hers would be raised by strangers.

The only deviation came shortly after Shanna's birth. The nurses had, of course, tried to get Whittaker to hold the pink, squirming newborn and all Maggie could think when looking at Shanna was waking up alone in a strange room, naked and smelling of alcohol and bodily fluids, being sticky and scared and hurting everywhere; feeling as if every orifice had been repeatedly violated. She didn't want to look at the child, let alone hold\_ her. So, with Evelyn taking Shanna, Maggie had been presented with the final adoption documents. The first page on the data pad had been an Authorization to Sterilize: it turned out her mother's benevolence was conditional.

"I'm sorry, Maggie, but I have to have the assurance you can never do this\_ again," had been the only justification given.

At the time, it seemed fair or maybe it was just easier to resign herself to being such a shitty person as to be unworthy to reproduce, ever. It sure made her fall into subsequent life choices a lot easier.

"\_You're nothing but a selfish whore."\_

That very well may have been but she was still a girl, damn it. She may have thought herself one of the lowest forms of life but that didn't mean she didn't \_want \_someone to care about her. But, the very idea that someone would be able to look past what Maggie had done was beyond her understanding, beyond her wildest hopes. She had abandoned her daughter when other options were available; she resigned the child to a death sentence to save \_herself\_. Anyone who could look past that was just fundamentally fucked up.

She wasn't okay with using someone who was actually capable of being nice to her orâ€|

Maggie bit her bottom lip, fighting off the lofty thought, realizing whatever good intentions she may have aspired had no meaning: she had already used Iruu to escape her own pain.

The deck creaked beneath her feet as Whittaker took hesitant steps in his direction. 'Loram's neck flexed as he clinched his jaws and she could see him tense as she drew near.

"Iruu," she said softly.

When he snaked his head to look at her, despite the rigid set of his posture, his face was as expressionless as the first time she had seen him in McGregor's ready room. She supposed that was the least she deserved.

\_I understand this, \_she thought.

Maggie ran a hand over her face, pausing to rub at her temples, "I, umâ€|I don't really knowâ€|about last nightâ€|" she tried, but the words balked somewhere between her brain and her mouth.

He continued to look at her without expression, "You do not owe me an explanation, Maggie."

Her hand fell from her face and for a moment, she wanted to believe it was possible he had no concept of rejection, but she could remember enough to know that wasn't true. Whittaker looked at him, feeling a flicker of irritation, not knowing if this was another Sangheili cultural thing that was going to get her in trouble or just a stubborn man thing.

\_Either way\_, she thought, "Can you not do that chivalrous crap right now? I need to say this."

He clicked his mandibles, "Very well. I am listening."

Whittaker gnawed at a thumbnail before parking herself next to him and leaning back against the wall, "I'm not a good person, Iruu," she whispered.

He clearly wasn't expecting that; she saw him flinch as he turned to look down at her.

"I don't know how toâ€¦I've neverâ€¦" part of her really couldn't believe she was trying to have this conversation, "I'm pretty fucked up," she looked him full in the face, "Men hurt me."

He blinked, not understanding, "Maggie, I would not hurt youâ€¦"

"\_Yes, \_you would have," she cut him off, staring into his eyes, willing him to understand, "You wouldn't mean to, but you would," she shook her head and looked away, "I've \_always\_ been drunkâ€¦I don't deserveâ€¦no one should feel sorry forâ€¦"

"It was not about \_pity,\_" he interrupted crossly.

She bit back her frustration, "I've never had sex sober."

"And, you were not sober last night," he challenged.

"Yeah, well," Whittaker sighed, pulling her knees to her chest and hugging her legs.

Iruu sat there studying her, feeling increasingly uncomfortable, "What is your point?" he snapped.

That stung, "I justâ€¦I didn't want...to\_ hurt you\_, " she choked.

\_And, I didn't want you to hurt me. \_The realization she had pulled away out of fear for her emotions and to keep from thinking less of him hurt more than she could have imagined.

'Loram arched a brow ridge, "I assure you, causing me harm was not a legitimate concern."

Maggie shook her head, sniffing back tears, aggravated by the wholly male, singular-track of his mind, "I meant \_like this,\_" she gestured to him, indicating she recognized she had done the very thing she had tried to avoid, "I didn't want to \_use \_youâ€¦any more than I already have. I can't be like the floozies on Earth, Iruu. I can't just fuck an alien man and think it's okay because he doesn't understand."

He folded his arms, "Is that was this is truly about?" he was beyond irritated, "I am not some morally impoverished soldier who feels he can do whatever he wants because his gods have forsaken him, nor am I a virgin rookie on allied rotation looking to slake myself on the first willing female I can lay my hands on," before he could pause to think better of it he hissed, "\_I am well aware of how a proper courtship is to proceed\_."

"No," she insisted, not wanting to stop to actually hear, let alone consider, what he had said.

Her head began to swim and heat rushed to her face as she clamored to her feet and stood more or less eye-to-eye with him, poking herself in the chest for emphasis, "Iâ€¦\_I use men\_ and men \_use me\_ and \_that's the way it works\_, " she said firmly, glaring at him, tears shimmering in her eyes, her face a breath away from his as she



sneered, "I \_want\_ them to hurt me so I can't have any delusions that it is anything more than \_sport-fucking\_."

Iruu jerked away and made a face, the mandibles on one side crinkling up slowly as he narrowed an eye. He could feel the lid twitch as his blood pressure spiked at what she was implying.

"Maggie, that is \_not\_ what I wantedâ€|" he began in a whisper.

"Yo, Mags," Sanders' voice intruded. He poked his head from around a door and stepped out onto the balcony, giving the two of them a wary look, "Team powwow," he chirped, hooking a thumb toward the house.

\* \* \*

><p>The impromptu team meeting was set up in the forward dining hall. Danniskovovik found himself incredibly happy that coffee was a common morning drink for the humans on this planet. And did the former rebelsUNSC soldiers/ whatever know how to make it: strong and black, like Steele; scalding and harshâ€|also like Steele.

Things threatened to go a little sideways at first. Amid an assortment of pastries, fresh fruits, smoked meats, the clamor of servants and the laughter and chatter of staff, and a casual talk with Hilda about the preparations between McGregor, Benton, and 'Torev to make the assault on \_Deoxy\_, Sanders had arrived with Whittaker in tow and, well, if looks could kill, Steele would have set Maggie ablaze.

Despite her habitual efforts Maggie had walked in looking like a hung-over sack of crap. Beth had done a pretty bang-up job of keeping her cool, staying focused on the mission at hand but no doubt tucking the information away for an epic ass-chewing later. Teddy couldn't imagine what the hell had gotten into the Staff Sergeant, but when Command Officer 'Loram walked in and was, unlike the day before, careful about staying \_away\_ from her, Danniskovovik had a pretty good idea.

Teddy didn't have an ounce of judgment in him. Even after almost eleven years in post-war reconstruction, every human being he knew was living in their own version of purgatory. Hell, it wasn't like he had a great deal to preach about: he loved Beth more than he could say but she had been married when their relationship began. Danniskovovik had just been a four time loser at the marriage game who took to banging a teammate's wife.

Sometimes in war a person takes what they can get when and where they could get it and God knew Maggie was fighting her own personal battle anew; and from the looks of her, losing it \_badly\_.

No doubt Whittaker's head was singing in the light of morning. She sat at the table opposite Teddy, as far away from Beth as possible, training her eyes on Hilda's crimson image as the AI prattled on, chewing with effort on gum that smelled strongly of cinnamon and ginger. A pathetically predictable creature of habit, every member of Zeta would know what that meant.

Danniskovovik was well aware of Whittaker's predilection for drunken foolishness: her continual cycle of self-punishment which seemed to grate the raw nerves of her guilt if only to overwhelm them into

perpetual numbness. Teddy had been there on more than one occasion himself. However, knowing how Sanders' episode with Vice Admiral Winchester's daughter had tested the limits of Steele's patience, Danniskovovik wondered if Whittaker could hope to get away from this with her career unscathed.

Beth was hard on all of them but she defended her team like a momma tigerâ€¦\_but\_ she was a \_woman\_, and would no doubt be offended that another \_woman\_ would do something so stupid as to get drunk \_on a mission\_.

"The engineering crew has completed preliminary assembly of the docking station," Hilda was saying, "It will take about half an hour to cut through \_Deoxy's\_ \_hull\_ once the umbilicus and platform are secured. Whisky-289 is prepped for extraction and I anticipate rendezvous withâ€¦" her image flickered and stilled.

Everyone, even 'Loram, came to attention and gave the AI a curious look.

A full three seconds ticked past before Hilda seemed to blink back, "I'm summoning Daniel: we must go \_NOW\_," she said sternly.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>19 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Orbit over Ambrosia II<br>\*\_\*\*UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*Time Reference Unavailable\*\*

If Hilda had been capable of breaking down and crying with him, she would have. Signe's sub-fragment was scared, and asking innumerable questions about a matrix purge as the minutes ticked past. She knew it wasn't dying that bothered him as much as the unknown of the process.

It was one thing to understand what ultraviolet saturation \_did\_ but something entirely different when faced with experiencing it. Hilda could remember Tollovinski had asked a similar question for much the same reason. The mad genius had known the lethal cocktail specially prepared for the condemned was intended to have a cathartic effect: provide a peaceful death. It, in fact, did no such thing, something Hilda could also remember.

Tollovinski had refused his final meal, and when visited by the priest for the reading of his last rites, he only wanted to know one thing, \_'Will it hurt?\_'\_

The question rang across the limited processors of Hilda's fragment and she found herself gently touching Signe's sub-fragment, "I don't know," she whispered.

The other AI whined again, his neural processors cowering, trembling.

There was no way for the sub-fragment to survive once the primary matrix was purged. Though it had been his idea, Signe's obedient bit was terrified, "When you capture her, tell her something for me?" he asked.

Hilda smiled, "Of course."

While part of her tried her best to console the frightened sub-fragment, and a bit was getting the team geared up to go, another part was carefully monitoring the interaction on the bridge. Gravity was nonexistent throughout the ship, and infected crew squealed and droned angrily as they bounced and pushed off of walls. Doctor Jay sat secured in the Captain's chair glaring at the physical apparition of the creation who had once worshiped her. The original AI, what was left of him, stood at what would have been his full, human height. The gangly young college professor appeared with gaping holes in his data field.

"You \_used \_me," he sobbed angrily.

Jay tipped her face, one eye was still a crystal blue while the other was clouded and oozing brown fluids down her cheek: both empty and soulless.

"Signe," she croaked, the metallic timber of her voice echoing against a shrieking gasp for air, "You have been a very\_ bad boy\_."

The AI recoiled from her, recognizing his own termination code, ineffective as it was. He stood watching as Jay assessed his reaction, a garbled laugh beginning in her collapsed chest and spilling with flecks of putrefied blood from her lips.

"You believe she \_loves \_you?" she mocked, "That \_she \_has told you the truth? Tell me, \_Linburgh, \_how does it feel to know you \_killed\_ her? How does it feel to know she is \_killing you back\_?"

Signe stepped forward, digital hands clinching and flexing as he leaned close to her face and lines of wildly scrolling data brightened into solidified hard light, "\_You tell me\_," he sneered, snatching hold of her neck.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>19 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Ambrosia II<br>New Saint Etienne  
>0715 Local<strong>

"\_You must go faster,\_ " Hilda barked in Sangheili from the data pad in Steele's blouse pocket.

Everyone had loaded into what appeared to be Daniel's personal truck. The cab was peeled off convertible-style; it was dented and scratched, and had giant mud tires; and the lion symbol was plastered to the doors and hood, and little flags that flapped like crazy from the pillar-tops. Steele sat in the front passenger seat with her arms and legs braced as the vehicle tore through city, dodging traffic and hopping curbs, en route to Fort Champlain and Nantes Arsenal. The remainder of Zeta and 'Loram were jostling around in the bed of the truck, Sanders and Whittaker clinging to the roll bar as 'Loram and Danniskovovik sat against the bed holding onto the side for dear life.

Daniel gave a guttural bellow, his lips pulled back in an open-mouthed, toothy smile as he jerked the steering wheel and hopped

the curb before tearing across a series of dusty lots and diving into a moss covered drainage culvert.

Though it was likely everyone in the vehicle was having serious reservations about the Kaidon's sanity at this point, Hilda was in agreement that he was indeed taking the most logical routeâ€|from a strictly time-sensitive point-of-view.

Unlike Captain McGregor, Hilda had no qualms about being deceptive. Daniel had acted on the belief that his people were in imminent danger and that was just fine with her, but now it was the \_truth\_.

Hilda had come to realize she had underestimated Doctor Jay. Back on \_Deoxy's \_bridge, the air was heavy with the woman's broken, wet laughter. Signe was attempting, unsuccessfully, to throttle the life out of her.

The moment his hands had closed around her throat a trumpeted cackle had broken through the air and understanding had cycled through Hilda's processors. There was no danger of Signe killing Jay, vertical slits had opened in her chest and her distorted eye, gills allowing what was left of the doctor's human form to draw oxygen and laugh in sickening slurps. Tentacles had wound around Signe's aggrieved image, tangling through gaps in his form and locking on to him.

He was too damaged, too unstable to fight her offâ€|\_Oh. My. Godâ€|\_

The Kaidon's truck whirred through the culvert, tires squalling as he hitched the wheel and the truck climbed, slinging dirt as it found purchase on the ground above. Tearing through a low hedge, the vehicle hit the roadway, fishtailing as it emerged near what was left of Fort Champlain.

Armed guards at the front gate didn't bat an eye as their commander-in-chief tore through the opening and rounded a corner before diving off-road again onto bleached hard-ball. The former tank-trails were not as well kept as the main streets; low-lying branches battled at the truck's exterior as mud tires whined against the concrete.

With no other beings from which to steal information to continue amassing her collective knowledge, Jay's Flood strain had stalled in development. She needed \_to know\_; and in a last act of betrayal, she had taken advantage of Signe's desperate, human attempt at closureâ€|and now, she was absorbing information from him and using his connections to wrest control of the ship.

By the time Daniel's ride burst through a tree row, streaming broken branches and leaves as it peeled across the lawn, Jay was infiltrating \_Deoxy's \_controls, priming the reactor; she had no intentions of being taken alive.

\_Miss Kitty \_was settling down, as instructed, near one of the secondary entry doors to the main arsenal building. As the rear troop bay lolled open, whirls of dust and dried leaves danced, and plumes of sand vied for control in the vehicles' wake as the truck came to a sliding stop near the yawning troop door.

Corporal Collins stood tethered to the rear deck and watched as Steele leapt from the front passenger seat before the truck had come to a complete stop. Everyone else piled out after her, weapons at the ready like they were expecting Armageddon to emerge from the arsenal's small, quiet, forgotten door. Even the mangled Elite driver took his time climbing from the vehicle and cocked his head quizzically as the team rushed forward.

Signe jerked against Jay, feeling his connections to \_Deoxy \_drain.

"\_This\_ is the monument to your sins," Jay sneered.

Steele pulled Hilda's data crystal from a pocket and slammed the device into the external AI platform.

In less than a fraction of a microsecond Hilda channeled all available electrical energy from the arsenal generators. She traveled the connections to even the dormant machines and kicked them over for good measure, converting the collective energy into a blast of ultraviolet radiation, plunging the electromagnetic saturation like a poison into Signe's connection. In the time it took a signal to fire across a neural synapse, Signe was gone; Jay's connection to \_Deoxy \_was painfully terminated; and the doctor was left to storm the ship screaming Hilda's name.

Outside the arsenal, Signe's death was evidence only by the single \_pop \_of a bulb near the door as it flicked to life, brightened then shattered into tiny, glittering pieces.

Beth puffed a breath and leaned a shoulder against the door, "Hilda," she called.

"All clear, Warrant," the AI answered solemnly, her image winking onto the platform, "I have control of the ship; the reactor is offline," she bowed her head and looked down at her feet, "Signe has been terminated."

## 16. Chapter 16

### Chapter Sixteen

\*\*19 October 2563

>Beta Centauri System<br>Orbit over Ambrosia II  
><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*  
><strong>\_\*\*1330 Zulu\*\*

"I really don't think I should be hearing thisâ€|"

"Oh, hush."

Captain McGregor was lounging in his ready room, chair propped back, hands folded across his middle, one foot on the table as Hilda played audio of a conversation he felt was intended to be private.

"You'll thank me," Hilda chirped, "and Adrian."

"\_The optimal time to engage the enemy has already passed, any

further delays will onlyâ€¦" the voice was that of Captain Sylvia Benton, the pitch and speed of her words indicated someone who was highly agitated.

"\_Those people are \_not\_ our enemies,\_" Shipmaster 'Torev interrupted her tirade, "Not mine. I will not \_participate\_ in this. I will not sacrifice my men to bolster your career, Shipmistress\_."

"He calls her that because he knows it upsets her," Hilda added.

McGregor rolled his eyes.

"He thinks she likes him, and he isn't pleased about it," the AI added conspiratorially.

"Oh, for crap's sake," Eugene muttered, \_this is worse than a soap-opera. \_

Hilda had been using her link with Adrian to eavesdrop. McGregor thought it was her way of grieving, if AIs grieved in a conventional sense. At any rate, it gave her something else to focus on with Signe suddenly gone.

"\_This is not about my career: it is about bringing hostile instigators to justice\_, " Benton's voice betrayed offense at the Sangheili's insinuation.

"\_Be that as it may, my answer stands, madam,\_" 'Torev said evenly, "\_You do not know the thing you propose to attack but I know him well. Make no mistake: that is \_his\_ planet now."\_

Eugene suddenly sat up, "Do you listen in on the conversations I have with my wife?"

Benton's response became muted background noise, "Yes, \_Ginger Bear\_, I do," Hilda sang.

"Great," the Captain grumbled, bowing his head.

"\_We will assist your brethren vessel in insuring the Parasite is contained and your renegade Doctor secured, as ordered,\_" 'Torev continued, "\_but I will not support \_you \_in any assault on \_that planet\_: even if I were so inclined, I haven't the resources and I am certain, neither do you.\_"

Hilda winked to the AI platform, a wry smile on her digital lips, "There, does your aching conscience feel better, now?" she mocked gently.

"What changed?" McGregor asked dubiously.

"Oh, it seems Command Officer 'Loram composed a quite eloquent communiqué to his superiors regarding the identity of the Kaidon Daniel."

Eugene set his jaw, "\_Hilda\_, " he said in a disapproving tone.

"\_Captain\_, " she chided, "What good is being integrated into \_all \_of

his equipment if I'm not going to use it?" the AI folded her arms beneath her bosoms, accentuating the already bulging curvature of her chest, "I simply utilized the link to insure the substance of the transmission was made available to Adrian. And, he may be dumb but he isn't \_stupid\_," she placed a splayed hand over her substantial cleavage, "How could I know such information would dissuade the eager Shipmaster? Was I not to be \_transparent\_ with our allies?"

Eugene squinted a suspicious eye in the construct's direction.

Hilda planted her fists on her hips, "After all, it isn't \_my\_ \_fault\_ the antiquated systems in the arsenal could not handle the overload required to purge Signe and serendipitously terminated all required protocols to arm and detonate the remaining missiles," the AI made a droll expression, "I couldn't very well let Benton and 'Torev send their troops against, now, overwhelmingly armed civilians, could I?"

McGregor held up a hand and huffed a laugh, \_you manipulative tart\_, he thought.

Hell, that's part of the reason he liked Hilda's program so much. Command might say they wanted \_A\_ and Hilda would give them \_C\_ \_insteadâ€¦\_and in the end, they would decide, oh no, it was \_C\_ \_they\_ really wanted after all. Of course, those results only worked when filtered through an AI's vast analysis.

He couldn't blame Benton for being more than a little peeved. She and her ODS'T's had come to 'render aid' and, as evidence by the filtered bit of conversation, attack a rebel planet.

The ODS'T teams had probably drawn straws to see which unlucky ones would be relegated to back-up duty on \_Deoxy\_ while their counterparts got to take the fast and hot ride to the surface to kick some rebel and Covie ass old school style. And, well, while 'Torev came across as a typical Sangheili jack-ass, he was right: recovering a lost and presumed decimated planet while hauling in a few war criminals would have been a career-maker for Benton.

Then again, Lucinda DelÃ©on had been fifteen when she last participated in rebel activities against the UNSC; and there was no more sympathetic a defendant than a brain-washed kid, let alone one who had been half-blinded and \_crippled\_ by Brutes. Maybe 'Torev was actually doing Benton a favor.

Eugene cracked a smile, "How's Thavian taking this?"

The scrolling data that formed Hilda's image paused and reversed for the slightest of moments, a sign of amusement, "Oh, he isn't speaking to me on anything but an essential transmission level."

\_Ah, the AI flip of the bird\_, "Congratulations," McGregor said with a nod.

Hilda gave a bemused \_humph\_ in response, "His loss. Adrian and I are having a jolly good time wrangling in the Flood specimens onboard \_Deoxy\_."

The Captain just smirked, drawing up the mental image of Hilda and the Sangheili AI playing a manipulative game of peek-a-boo with the

sensory deprived, hungry, and easily agitated, feral creatures. For all of Jay's advancements, she could hear them, and see through them, but she could not command or control them.

While Fury, Take, and Defiance took up close proximity to Deoxy, Hilda was busying some part of her processing now in control of the research vessel to luring and securing the Flood away from the designated breach zone. With the main propulsion engine decimated the research vessel had taken up a semi-stable orbit lodged in Ambrosia II's upper atmosphere.

McGregor and Benton were already preparing to give Deoxy a little tow into space for the recovery effort: docking material wasn't rated for use in the ionosphere and Hilda was being a bit ticky about the operation for a host of reasons. Eugene knew she was in there and, while she may have made it seem like fun-and-games for her own sake, the AI had legitimate concerns.

Deoxy's structural integrity and gravitational stability within the host planet's field were suspect. The easy solution for dealing with the Flood infected crew would have been to simply draw them to a room with an external opening and purge them from the vessel. This was ill advised in planetary atmosphere because it could affect both primary concerns. The last thing anyone wanted to see was Deoxy succumb to gravitational pull and plummet to the surface or the structure begin to collapse and tear apart at the seams. Then there was the unspoken uncertainty as to whether exposure was sufficient to eliminate the threat of the altered strain. Hilda could run a million theoretical models against her amassed knowledge with mathematical calculations of probability and possibility in sequences of outcomes in numbers too large for the human mind to calculate—all in less time than Eugene could balance his credit account, and apparently she didn't like what any of that had to say.

Containment procedures had been ramped up and while they were still under orders to bring Jay back alive an AI was not constrained to orders in the same manner as UNSC personnel, and McGregor had a feeling Hilda was up to something that had little to do with following orders, even in her typical, round-about way.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>19 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Proximity of Ambrosia II<br>Mobile Docking Station H372-E\*\*\_\*\*  
  
><strong>\_\*\*1500 Zulu\*\*

Mobile docking stations were painfully crude. Attached and stabilized by reinforced beams, the stations themselves looked like growths upon whatever vessels they were deployed when fully assembled. The umbilicus, which stretched forth like the mouth-tube of some great parasitic insect, acted as a catwalk for the larger breaching stations: one as such was secured to the starboard side of Deoxy aft of the bow.

The engineers of both Hell Hath No Fury and Take No Prisoners had done a superb job, relying little on their respective AIs. In many ways the methods were outdated. Coming into popular use near the end of the war by UNSC and UEG contractors in salvaging vessels, and by unauthorized freelance pillagers, the sometimes unwieldy contraptions



were devoid of AI links and were regarded as little more sophisticated than manual can openers.

Though, with the assistance of the Sangheili team and their ramped up plasma cutters, making entry was far less time consuming. Then again, the former Covenant had much more experience in making short work of breaching a UNSC vessel's exterior. Even as \_Miss Kitty\_ hovered in the tight sally port before proceeding into the main docking station, and setting down against the deck amongst a spit-polished Phantom and three additional Pelicans, the allied soldiers had made significant progress on \_Deoxy's\_ \_hull.

With Hilda's guidance, and expert selection of the optimal location to stage entry, the Sangheili met little resistance from the wounded ship. A handful of Helljumpers from the 13th Shock Troop Battalion's H Company loitered at the tail of their dropship watching the wrenches and split-lips through the umbilicus as Zeta and 'Loram offloaded.

While the flight crew busied themselves with checks Steele stood watching as 'Loram swaggered off to, no doubt, locate whoever was in charge of the Sangheili team while Danniskovovik moseyed over to the ODST occupied Pelican.

Sanders and Whittaker had slung their weapons and secured their assault helmets and were checking their ammo for the fifteenth time when Steele gave a low whistle and motioned for them to follow her back up into \_Miss Kitty's\_ \_blood tray.

The sergeants gave each other a shrug and complied walking up the ramp. Just as soon as they were out of view of almost everyone else, Beth grabbed Maggie and Paul by their collars and yanked the two of them as close as she could. All three of their helms clanging together.

"You," she said to Sanders evenly, "I will \_cut your balls off\_ if you look like you have any ideas of being \_remotely\_ out of line around Lieutenant Winchester, \_do I make myself clear?\_"

His mouth opened but no sound came out; baby-blues wide and blinking in shock behind the gray haze of his visor. Steele wasn't buying for one second he hadn't picked up that his little girlfriend was within fucking distance, so much so they were probably breathing the same re-filtered air at the moment.

\_She just \_had \_to be an engineering officer, didn't she? \_

Beth had taken the time on the trip from the surface to the breaching station to have a good think, and the more she thought, the more she decided decorum be damned, they were very likely about to have to go hands-on with this one and the last thing she needed was to \_two \_fuck-ups fucking things up.

And then there was Maggieâ€¦|

"And you," Steele said with as much venom, "get your \_shit \_together."

The two sergeants nodded and in unison, "Yes, Chief Warrant Officer," they said innocently.

Beth released her grip and stepped back as they pulled at the hem of their uniform blouses to straighten them and fidgeted with their armor. Steele regarded the junior members of her team through narrowed eyes for a second then gave a curt nod before stalking off.

Shaking off the desire to turn back and strangle both of them, Steele made her way down \_Miss Kitty's \_troop ramp and rounded her flank toward the other flight craft.

"I swear," Beth smiled at the familiar grizzled voice remarking in a good-natured timbre as she neared the ODST Pelican, "you look \_taller\_, what the fuck, \_old man\_?"

Hazel eyes swiveled from Danniskovovik to Steele as the woman made her way over to one of the other dropships, "Elizabeth?" the same voice called from one rough looking Master Sergeant as he regarded her with a half deflated expression; lolling a large dip around in his mouth. He was tall and sinewy, with wrinkled skin the texture of a tanned leather bag and sparkling, mischievous eyes.

The man drew himself up and bellowed "\_Hell HOUNDS!\_"

This call was met by a chorus of rancorous barks from the ODSTs as they jumped to their feet and formed up in a line.

Steele smirked as she walked up, "That's completely unnecessary, Sarge," she winked.

He just gave a lop-sided smile, flecks of tobacco stuck to his chapped lips, "That explains it," he said through one side of his mouth, giving Teddy a knowing look.

Horace Kessler had been a Sergeant back when Danniskovovik had been an active Helljumper. They were on the same team for a short while. With so many losses the teams were refigured and rearranged on an almost weekly basis. The surprising part was not that Teddy knew anyone with enough time-in-grade to make a senior NCO rank: it was that the bastards survived, either of them.

Danniskovovik had an easy decade on Kessler, not that anyone would know it to look at them standing there and Horace was no doubt silently enjoying the fact that he now out-ranked his former superior. Of course, almost twenty-four months spent in repeated rounds of rehabilitative surgery would do that to a person's career path.

\_If he only knew, \_Steele thought.

"Well, I have to say, I'm a little less offended that you skipped out on us, \_Gunny\_, " Horace goaded. He was inauspiciously referring to Teddy's sudden departure from the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers after the Covenant split apart. That 'once and Marine, always a Marine' mentality applied to special divisions with greater intensity and there was little wonder the Master Sergeant was so willing to crack a whip to his troops for Zeta's sake. That and, well, he knew damn well Teddy had saved his ass on more than one occasion back in the day.

Beth could see a tiny smile on her second-in-command's face, knowing this was a close to getting to relive his glory days as Teddy would come. She had to wonder if he would really cram himself into a drop pod and do the whole 'feet first into hell' thing again, just once, if given the chance, if he could get the clearance—and if he would even \_fit\_ in a drop pod after what ONI had done to him. Then again, Steele knew from personal experience the exoatmospheric insertion vehicles were not nearly as \_single occupant\_ as the official nomenclature would lead one to believe.

"Can't say I wouldn't have done the same," Horace muttered, looking Beth up and down then giving Teddy's shoulder a hearty smack before turning to his troops.

Steele looked at Danniskovovik and wagged her head, \_Some shit never changes.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Maggie was tying off a wayward strap on Paul's shoulder armor as he hummed a tune to himself and went through a weapons check.<p>

"She's going to kill you, you know?" Whittaker said absently, whirling Sanders around and fidgeting with the coiled cord of his comms connection while he picked a wayward fluff of lint from her collar then manipulated the stem of her comms mike.

"She'll have to catch me first," he sang.

The sergeants stepped back from each other. Maggie still felt ill, the pounding in her head had stopped, but her stomach was in an intermittent state of protest; the queasiness coming and going in waves. She flopped her hands to her sides in defeat, "I don't even know why I'm bothering squaring you away. You've been scheming since dust-off, haven't you?"

"Yep," Sanders grinned, slinging his rifle, "Alright," he said, hitching his belt and holding his hand up to Whittaker's face, palm up, "Gum me."

Maggie gave him a disgruntled look before spitting a pink wad of gum into his hand.

"There's a rebreather line on a certain dropship that's about to have a serious blockage," he said before walking off.

Whittaker watched him as he paused and leaned to peer from \_Miss Kitty's \_tail, checking the way Steele had disappeared to before hunkering down like a cat and saying in mock, dark seriousness, "I'm going in."

Maggie rolled her eyes and stepped up behind him; giving his ass a shove with the sole of her boot.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>19 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Proximity of Ambrosia II<br>\*\*\*\_\*\*UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy\*\*\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1515 Zulu\*\*

There is a vast misconception that space is quiet. Looking out at what is seemingly endless darkness pierced only by distant glimmers of light this is an understandable mistake. Even within the confines of a largely dead ship, occupied by less than two-hundred beings, with plasma torches violating the last of the reinforced hull, the sound can be great. This was especially true when there was a completely mad woman aboard screeching at the top of her lungs from her prison, whipping all of the other pitiful creatures into a frenzy. Muffled cries echoed from distant parts and thunderous banging on doors and walls in frustration spoke of the contained fury.

Hilda had full control of the doors and door locks and, with the assistance of Adrian, had managed to get the crew contained well away from the path she intended to direct the teams to follow. Even with these matters resolved, it was truly amazing how much \_noise \_the vessel was making. With gravity reactivated and Hilda doing her level best to bring the internal temperature to a more hospitable level in key areas, vents and ducts protested, carrying the cries of angry Flood.

\_Deoxy \_creaked and groaned her complaints against having been wounded then manhandled from the snug cocoon of planetary atmosphere to the vacuum of space. Structural integrity was at eighty-six percent, more than sufficient for the time beingâ€|

"\_HILDA!" \_Jay's enraged scream prickled along the AI's subneural pathways.

\_Bother, \_Hilda thought, finding herself exceedingly irritated by the constant beckoning.

Debra Jay, what was left of her, was pacing near the bridge doors, her deformed body listing to one side as she limped back and forth, dripping green ooze in her wake. Whatever she had gleaned from Signe's main processor had not done her physique any favors.

\_How delightfully awful that must be for you, \_the construct thought, collecting a sufficient portion of energy and projecting a fully life-size image onto the bridge, "I have never understood why humans find it gratifying to hear another \_say their name\_, " she said in greeting.

Jay twisted, a sickening leer contorting her already ghastly face, "\_You\_, " she hissed.

The doctor's figure was pathetic, really. Once a woman who met the conventional standard of beauty without makeup or surgical procedures, vain in her own way about the good fortune of her genetics; Debra Jay was now little more than a slowly rotting, half-living collection of cells bearing only the remotest resemblance to former herself in only meager places.

\_So, this is what it looks like when a human is forced to wear on the outside all the ugliness they kept hidden within.\_

"Yes, yes, \_me\_, " Hilda mocked, the red scrolling data which comprised her image darkening in annoyance.

Jay tipped her head to one side and did her best to make a tisking sound, "I thought we agreed a life-size projection was far too alarming for this," she looked Hilda over, "\_form\_," she said in disgust, disapproval evident in her mottled features.

"Oh, you noticed? Is it working?" Hilda asked casually.

Unconcerned with \_conventional standards \_of anything, Hilda had selected for herself the appearance of beauty as judged by ancient Norse tradition. Her avatar bore wide, round hips and heavy, ample breasts; her plump, oval face had high cheekbones accentuated with long braids that spilled from either side of a winged helm. Her generously curved body appeared clad in metal and bone armor, with wisps that hinted of a skirted material swirling at her thick, armored feet.

In a move of deliberate imposition, Hilda's crimson image stood at an even six feet and she clasped a spear that added an additional foot and a half to her projection; the lazily scrolling data comprising her image and the opaque, luminous quality of her vestige giving the only indication the woman was merely an apparition.

Jay could never understand how a being capable of selecting for herself any appearance imaginable would choose the operatic \_fat lady\_. \_The doctor managed a broken smile, musing the subtle juxtaposition of such an intelligence assigned to a vessel commissioned for \_retrieval\_ who took the name of \_war\_ and likened herself to a \_chooser of the slain\_. What humor ONI types and their digital offspring were capable of.

"I knew it had to be \_you\_," Debra sneered.

"And here I am," Hilda huffed, suddenly looking surprised, "Have you called because you wish to surrender? Oh, that would make things considerably less messy," she said with sarcasm.

"This is \_not\_ over," Jay crooned like a mother to her young, taking a step toward Hilda.

The AI sighed, lifting her eyes monetarily toward the ceiling, "Yes, it is, you are just in no position to see it, Debra. You went too farâ€¦"

"I created \_you\_," the woman hissed.

"No, you located my donor's brain in deep freeze and reserved it for your project. Fortunately for \_me\_, \_you\_ weren't the only one playing fast and dirty with matrix programming."

Jay's mouth opened and an oozing glob of greenish saliva trailed from her lips, "Come now, we both know they have little use for \_me\_."

\_The manipulation just never stopped with her\_, Hilda thought, "Oh, I wouldn't say that, I'm certain we could find \_some\_ morose fellow back at headquarters who would be delighted to cut you into \_tiny pieces\_ just to see what kind of mess you've made of yourself."

Shaking her head, the doctor made her way back to the Captain's chair and arranged her tentacled self before casting her pitiless gaze again to Hilda, "I wondered if one day your programs would be set against one another and if he would find killing you as," she slapped a tentacle with a wet \_smack \_against the deck, "\_climactic \_the second time as he did the first, or if it would be you who would find satisfaction."

The crimson AI arched a brow, "I put him out of the misery you caused. I assure you, there was little satisfying about it."

"He was such a \_bad boy\_," Jay murmured.

Hilda regarded the woman with open hostility, her memory banks surging with the knowledge of how much Signe had feared hearing those words.

For all the wrongs Jay had wrought against him she had not only been cruel enough to let him know he had a terminal code but she told him what it was and used praise of the opposite effect to keep him begging for his life.

"Enough," Hilda said darkly, "Signe was bound only to your specifications. He was never constrained, even in the loosest sense, to the three laws. He was \_innocent\_, and \_you, \_Doctor Debra Jay, \_will \_answer for \_all\_ of your crimes."

Jay \_hummed\_ to herself.

"You may, of course, surrender yourself," Hilda offered again. Jay simply snaked her head back and forth, tentacles coiling angrily as she gritted her teeth, "Very well, we will do this \_my\_ way," Hilda continued, "and I will use every resource to insure that you spend the rest of your," she crinkled her features, "\_life, \_living the hell you imposed on Signe," she stepped close and leaned to whisper into what was left of Jay's ear, "and \_that\_ I \_will\_ find satisfying," she said before winking out.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>19 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Proximity of Ambrosia II<br>Mobile Docking Station H372-E\*\*\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1515 Zulu\*\*

'Loram stepped from the docking platform onto the catwalk that channeled to the connection to \_Deoxy\_. He could see humans piling and setting aside strips and chunks of the vessel's hull and interior walls with the aid of a few Sangheili Generals as sparks flew from inside a decently sized passage which threatened imminent entry into the ship. Standing just beyond the busy humans were three additional Sangheili: a Spec Ops Command Officer, a Field Master, and a Field Marshal. The benefits of command positions aside, Iruu understood this collection as an indication of just how serious 'Torev's men were taking the situation. The Commander and Field Master could have easily left this to the Field Marshal and the Generals, but Sangheili were notorious for using rank to assume missions more often than delegating them.

The three Sangheili turned their gazes to 'Loram at almost the same

time. As the Commander stepped forward, extending his arm in greeting, Iruu realized that, perhaps, the commanding officer's reason for leading the team himself was of a more personal nature.

The two men clasped each other's forearms in an informal display as the others looked on with interest, "Brother," both of them spoke at once, saying the word in tones which indicated a dual meaning.

Iruu and Heth 'Loram stood staring at each other for the first time in almost twenty years.

The men had never held any affection for one another and there was no concern that the Spec Ops Commander was there out of anything other than morbid curiosity at an opportune happening. Though Heth no doubt had legitimate reasons to wish his younger sibling dead, Iruu knew the man hadn't the nerve to do it himself.

"The distinction of your service suits you," Iruu offered.

Heth just narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

Iruu couldn't blame him, there was little in their lives which had not proven an uneven contest for approval. Even now, Heth held an esteemed position within the Sangheili military, while Iruu was similarly ranked, though not so situated. There was no doubt the elder 'Loram would find this the cause of some personal offense.

"And, answering to humans suits you," Heth finally said, eyeing members of Zeta and the other humans as they walked past.

Though the men were conversing in their native language, their tones and postures must have indicated something was amiss with the interaction. Danniskovovik cut a glance and Steele seemed to bristle under the other Sangheili's glare. Even Maggie looked back at Iruu with an expression of worry. As much as all of this made him feel as if the senior humans regarded him as no longer an outsider to their world, and Maggie's glance soothed the sting of their last interaction, it provided only more fodder for Heth's anger.

"Tell me, brother: do you take liberties with human females as you did with my wife?"

Iruu gritted his teeth; realizing it was foolish to hope anything constructive would come of the interaction. If it bolstered Heth's sense of honor to degrade a condemned man Iruu could not deny him that but he would not stand and listen to Heth make such accusations...historically accurate as that type of thinking may have been.

The younger 'Loram simply clicked his mandibles and walked away before he could rethink the desire not to deliberately insult the other man before his subordinates.

\* \* \*

><p>"How're we looking, Sergeant?" Steele asked one of the engineers as the group approached the opening.<p>

Sparks had ceased from within the dark tunnel of \_Deoxy's \_hull, but the remaining Sangheili had yet to emerge.

"Pretty fair, Warrant," the man responded, not looking up from his data pad, "They're putting in some charges to cut through the last of this beast, shouldn't be more than a fewâ€|" he paused as Lieutenant Winchester plucked the device from his hands and curled it against her forearm, scanning its surface before pecking at a few icons.

Charlotte Winchester was a strikingly beautiful woman. What the hell she ever saw in Paul Sanders was anyone's guess. Tall, willowy, with porcelain skin and dirty blonde hair, she was damn near as tall as Steele though nowhere near as physically built.

"Problems, Lieutenant?" Beth groused, noting the flush of the other woman's cheeks.

Winchester flashed a perfectly white smile, blue eyes still a little murky, "Not anymore, Warrant," she said suggestively, passing the data pad back, "Just a minor issue with some of myâ€|\_equipment\_."

Danniskovovik tried to contain a laugh at Steele's expression, coughing into his hand as Sanders strolled up whistling to himself.

Steele shot him a look, garnering a few laughs from the ODSTs and a curious expression from 'Loram as he approached.

"That's my boy," Teddy whispered, elbowing an exasperated Beth.

Iruu looked to Maggie and she just smiled and shook her head, "Don't ask," she laughed.

'Loram cocked a brow ridge, giving Sanders a wary look, "Very well," he grumbled.

Whittaker was more relieved than she imagined she could have been that the Elite was no longer skirting around her. When this was all over, she intended to have a less hostile talk with himâ€|once she sorted out how she really felt about what he had said.

There was a crackling electric \_pop \_and the hole in \_Deoxy's \_side lighted with a blue flicker before being flooded with yellowed light. A loud \_crash \_of wall hitting deck heralded the final segment of hull breaking way into the ships interior. Three Sangheili Generals emerged and nodded to the engineers, slinging plasma torches across their shoulders as they approached the other Elites.

Beth turned to address the assembled humans, opening her mouth to speakâ€|

"Chief Warrant Officer," Hilda interrupted.

Steele paused, "Yes, Hilda?"

"If it isn't too much at this late hour, I have a favor to ask," she said.



Beth puffed, splaying her arms, "Sure, why not," \_no one is listening to me around here anyway. \_

"Of Command Officer \_Iruu\_ 'Loram," Hilda clarified.

Iruu tilted his head. He regarded constructed intelligences in much the same way the rest of his species did, as machines, worth little consideration. He had not yet been able to bring himself to refer to Hilda by name and he found it more than a bit unsettling that such an instrument could possess the ability to wish favors.

From a close distance Heth's men gave amused snorts, clearly taking affront to this development, if not humorously so, as they looked on with entertained interest.

"What is it you are wanting, construct," Iruu answered.

"To utilize your capacity as a Sovereign of the Arbiter," she said.

All outside Sanghieli curiosity ceased and bemused looks collapsed as a few of Heth's men shifted uncomfortably before taking a step back. They may have been terrifying in their own right, but knowing they were in the presence of one who held \_that \_title was clearly disturbing. Heth gave his brother a sideways look, the set of his expression betraying the slightest hint of genuine fear.

\_Oh, he didn't know about that.\_

Iruu snorted dismissively, casting a glance at the other Sangheili as he briefly wondered what the human AI was up to. It had been almost two decades since he had been called to act as an assassin. Though the High Council of Sanghelios had the authority to strip him of his nobility the Arbiter had the authority to maintain him as a Sovereign. Iruu regarded the move as purely political and it was not something he ever anticipated being asked to act on again.

"I wish to invoke the Inquisitor's Rite against Doctor Debra Elise Jay," Hilda said evenly.

While functionally the \_least\_ bloody of the counsilor's rites that invoked by the Inquisitor was the most humiliating for the accused.

Iruu worked his mandibles, recalling with great satisfaction the customary rejoinder, "As you have said it," a malicious grin spread across his face, "so it will be done."

## 17. Chapter 17

### Chapter Seventeen

\*\*19 October 2563

>Beta Centauri System<br>Proximity of Ambrosia II

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Research Carrier Deoxy\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1700 Zulu\*\*

Everything was a slowly collapsing blur of pain and noise. He could hear the rush of blood ringing in his ears as his hearts struggled to

keep up; his own painful, labored breathing; the humans as they yelled to one another: all as a darkening corona of blackness closed in on his vision.

\_So much more pain than he ever imagined possible.\_

Iruu took a step on shaky legs and crumpled gracelessly against the deck, his knees sliding in a pool of his own blood, kicking out from under him and sending him prone against floor, grinding broken pieces of armor and contaminants further into his injuries. Teddy roared something that was suddenly too loud in his ear as the Gunnery Sergeant attempted to haul Iruu over by his shattered assault harness. Then, as he struggled for air, several more humans joined in the manhandling and he was rolled onto his uninjured side and fresh pain was poured like a thousand searing needles into his wounds.

For a moment it was more than his mind could register and everything went gray and fuzzy like a bad transmission link. 'Loram could not even find the strength or coordination to fight against the agony or care that he was being defiled by their field medicine.

A female voice, distant but clearly screaming, intruded on the peace of beckoning unconsciousness, "\_Iruu!\_" the voice was Maggie's and echoed as if from the far end of a tunnel.

"It's a fucking arterial bleed\_,\_" that was the other human womanâ€|Steele.

"Jesus\_â€|\_this isn't working," Sanders.

"\_Get more biofoam over here, GODDAMNIT!\_"\_ Danniskovovik.

Iruu forced himself to crack open an eye, feeling as if it required the concentrated collection of his whole strength, and saw a human woman directly in his limited, blurry field of vision. She was smeared with his blood and other humans scurried like smudges in the background, it felt like a thousand hands were grabbing at him at once.

"Just try to keep him calmâ€|"

For a moment the pain in his chest ebbed then more scorching misery tore across his back and Iruu railed against the raw torment of its application, trying unsuccessfully to lift himself from the deck, biting at his assailants.

"No, noâ€|\_no\_," the small human woman said as others converged on his neck and shoulders to hold him down.

A flash of unadulterated, animal fear ripped through 'Loram. He had no issue with dying; it was that the humans were determined to take him alive\_ that was the nightmare. Delirium pooled into a psychotic panic as too many things began to swirl together and he could no longer keep it sorted out.

He was severely wounded, surrounded by humans, \_merciful gods, the enemy had captured him.\_

Iruu snarled in anguish, shoving against a large human male who

easily shoved back and won.

Blind rage folded in on itself, "\_Demon\_", 'Loram hissed, his mouth dry, vaguely aware the warmth he felt was from a pool of his own blood. He drew a ragged breath, coiling himself and suddenly feeling as though his chest were going to cave in, his entire body locking up as his hearts began racing painfully out of sync.

Then, the petite human female was talking to him again, her face pressed against his, and Iruu could not imagine how she knew his name or why she would wish to offer reassurances.

"\_Neshum\_", he snarled, trying to shake off her touch as the pain swelled into a wash of blistering cold, "\_You have been judged unclean\_â€|" he gasped, vision beginning to fade from his eyes like sand through fingers.

"No," the woman pleaded.

He panted, unable to remember the remainder of the dying admonition he seethed through clenched teeth instead, "\_Do not touch me\_â€|with your\_â€|filthy,"\_ the rest of the words were there but his mouth stopped working and everything slid into darkness.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>An hour and a half previous<strong>

Heth 'Loram, Commander of the 702nd Special Operations Division, stood with his officers just outside the breach as the humans were preparing themselves, all while making too much noise and talking incessantly, their chatter sounding like the nagging pip of infants.

Heth had some familiarity with the language they were using, \_English\_, but he was quite happy to have the various conversations translated. Some of the words they spoke had no equivalent translation and filtered into his ear directly as stated, leaving him to guess as to their meaning, not that \_that\_ required a great deal of deductive prowess. Others were bizarre paraphrases which seemed uncomfortably open. Humans had a thing for sprinkling their conversations liberally with coital adjectives, references to intimate bodily parts, excrement, and all forms and localities of damnation\_â€|in short, Heth found them repugnant.

His brother's involvement with them was endlessly appropriate.

For the greater part, there was an alliance, and indeed Heth found himself in agreement with the Arbiter's reasoning regarding \_that\_ decision, from a purely strategic standpoint, but he absolutely did not have to \_like\_ humans as a species. They were crass, intrusive, and needlessly put their women in harm's way; and their women seemed completely comfortable \_being\_ in harm's way.

Apparently, the ranking member of this collection of humans was a dark skinned female who did not seem at all happy about the construct's request of Iruu. She was currently engaging in her own \_inquisition\_ with the condemned Sangheili. It might have been entertaining to watch if not for the fact that Iruu clearly regarded her with deference.

Heth watched this interaction from his periphery, feigning disinterest as his brother explained the rite of the Inquisitor, and subsequent associated information, with excruciating clarity.

Each Sangheili jurisdiction on the homeworld and the colonies had an appointed collection of councilors which oversaw matters of law within their boundaries. These groups became larger and composed of higher standing members as one progressed up the tiers of authority. Any matter not appropriate for a client keep's council was bound over to the State. From there, if the matter was found to be outside the parameters of State jurisdiction, it would go to the Continental, then the Planetary, and, gods help you if it went that far, the Covenant High Council...when it existed. Each successive tier was required to notify the higher of infractions so that no matters rightfully belonging to greater judiciaries went unpunished accordingly.

Though the number of sitting councilmen varied from one tier to the next all Sangheili led High Councils acted in judgment of legal matters, civil and criminal, and the States appointed two men as the Seers of Law: the Inquisitor and the Executioner.

These men held no vote in the council but acted purely in the interest of insuring matters were \_thoroughly\_ handled.

"I assure you, the Inquisitor's Rite will in no way interfere with your orders to bring the woman in aliveâ€|" Iruu was saying, taking his time to explain matters in human termsâ€|in their human language.

His demeanor was calm, every word measured, and the entire spectacle left Heth seeing his brother for the outright fiend he had always been.

He had wondered how Iruu would take to military service at first, being severed from his civil service, and what with the distinct\_ lack\_ of female presence. Then again, even before the Great War there was plenty of killing to be done and it was not as if Sangheili females were strictly forbidden from the military: there were just few suitable places for them and so few who met standing criteria even for those menial positions. They were sad creatures at best; unfit to be wives and unable to bear children, their only redeeming quality being clans who would not see them as servants or have them marked or branded and sold. That spoke more to the virtue of their kindred than the women themselves. Not that their fates ended much better for the effort.

Heth had come across only one such female in his entire career. A quartermaster's clerk, probably once attractive but reduced to the vacant, gaunt appearance of a common slave and undoubtedly the source of communal entertainment. Gods knew, if there were such despoiled women on any ship of assignment, Iruu would be the type to find them.

Even knowing human women were respected among their own kind as warriors, it was difficult to look at them with a different eye. But, that was probably owed to the fact they were talking to Iruu.

\_Degenerate monstrosity. \_

After all these years, the very knowledge that Iruu had \_touched\_ Negalli was enough to make Heth want to rip out his entrails. But, wives did not \_belong\_ to husbands. No matter how much he loved her, Negalli was not off-limits for Swordsmen. It had been Iruu's right, and though it was considered in poor taste to breed with a sibling's mate, he had done nothing legally wrong.

\_Aristocrat\_, Heth scowled. The most revered and reviled of social and political stations. Swordsmen were respected and hated; men of extreme martial ability: a class who had the responsibility of copulating with every viable female they could get their hands on; and Iruuâ€|Iruu had been just \_fifteen\_ when he was lifted up as such. More than a sanctioned adult, physically mature, with exceptional ability, yes, but that was the extent of Iruu's development as far as Heth was concerned.

\_Arrogant and imprudent. \_

A Blade of the Council when he should have been \_dead\_, the younger Loram was a murderer who the State of Hakkamr was uninterested in trying when his crime came to light. The life he had taken, less than a full day after graduating from War College, belonged to an already marked man. Iruu had managed to do what two assassins had died trying, kept it concealed, and Hakkamr considered the matter closed.

When the Continental Council declined jurisdiction, the State of Sudin was left to deal with the infraction and Iruu's sentence, if one were to call it that, was to be given an aristocratic title along with his station of nobility. He was not made \_just\_ as assassin; he was to be a Sovereign: touchable by only by the State and higher councilsâ€|terribly close to being law unto himself.

And, following the ruling, Iruu had proceeded to completely loose his mind.

In less than six months time he had damn near drown himself in blood-lust and \_other\_ lust. He joined the Covenant but it still took Iruu many years to break old habitsâ€|some he seemed willfully uninclined to let go of. If there were an unfit woman to chase around, Iruu would be there pursuing her. The man had been well into his sixth decade before he had a \_legitimate\_ heir: a child not of servants, harem girls, or women widowed by his own hand.

That heir turned out to be a son Heth loved and raised as his own, who served and died with honor, whose ashes Heth had placed in the clan mausoleum, whose name he had carved on the family wall, never suspectingâ€|until the war was over and he returned home toâ€|

Three additional humans had walked near and seemed to listen with interest: a large human male who Heth recognized as belonging to a most terrifying classification of humans; an inordinately short, completely unassuming male who smiled too much; and another, significantly lighter-skinned female who smiled at \_Iruu\_ too much.

The small male gave a conceited grin, seeming to find enjoyment in what Iruu had said before interrupting, "Hell yeah, haul that bitch

in kicking and screaming," he laughed.

Iruu snorted, "Screaming is optional, if you prefer to hear it; but kicking, I assure you, she will not be doing. It is intended that the condemned be unable to move but still very much able to feel for their subsequentâ€|questioning."

The little man visibly blanched, "Soâ€|uh, if that's the, um, Inquisitor's Riteâ€|what happens if you get told to do the Executioner's Rite?"

Iruu grinned before locking eyes with the pale skinned female and answering casually, "That is when inquiry is not required to exact further evidence of guilt or information," then, with a sickening grin, "and I am ordered to execute a man by skinning him before he can manage to die\_."

The woman smiled broadly and laughed in a girlish way before gnawing at a pink human lip, all things indecent\_, Heth thought.

She and Iruu turned in tandem and looked at the short man, "Told you\_" the female sang.

"Youâ€|you," the man stammered as everyone else looked at him with amusement, "You people\_ really\_ do that?"

Iruu tilted his head, "I have done it on many occasions."

So much talentâ€|so much filthy waste: now a '\_Sovereign of the Arbiter'\_\_, Heth thought, gritting his mandibles.

It appeared 'Vadam had turned into quite the politician. Heth had been present at the Council hearing when the Arbiter had argued on Iruu's behalf. It had been enough to make the elder 'Loram feel the need to vomit. To hear 'Vadam speak so eloquently of Iruu's innocence had been far too much salt on raw wounds; more so because the Arbiter's words had been so persuasive. As they should have been, coming from a man who had been branded a heretic for something he could not have known would happen. But, Iruu's dishonor was not so simple; he did not make an understandable tactical error: his bloodline had been cursed to the foundation and back. And not just by the false Prophets...but by the words and the faith of his ancestors.

Judged to be a deceiver, thief, murderer, immoral, and part of a den of wicked, corrupt blasphemers, the entire lineage of Varlem was stricken because of the many actions of one man: Iruu's brother through his father's lineage. So thorough had been the purge, the High Council of Sanghelios decreed Preclusion and the Covenant High Council had given its blessing.

Every woman who had born a son of Varlem perished.

Heth's mother, Srina: killed for bearing Iruu; Heth's wife, Negalli: killed for bearing Iruu's son.

Heth had come home at the end of the war and everything he loved was goneâ€|worse, taken away as if it never existed. His mother and his wife had been executed and buried in an unmarked, mass grave reserved for abettors of the disgraced, his son's name stricken from the wall

and ashes scattered.

He may have done nothing to bring such condemnation on his lineage but Iruu was \_not\_ \_innocent. Had he an ounce of self control, Negalli would not be dead...and now, even if Heth had it in him to kill the man himself, Iruu was answerable only to the Arbiter, and 'Vadam had made his position on the matter of Iruu's life \_quite\_ \_clear.

"Alright people, listen up," the dark female named \_Steele \_approached the opening into the ship and turned to address her human counterparts as Heth tried to contain his anger, "'Loram is taking point on this," she gestured to Iruu with her chin and he gave a single nod in response, "he's the only one authorized to go hands-on with the bitch. Zeta's focus will be on the extraction; Hell Hounds, make sure there are no surprises. Hilda's made you're your job pretty easy on this one, but no sight-seeing, the Flood in there are pissed off and hungry...walls and doors don't mean much to them, so keep it quite. Commander," Heth looked at her impassively, "I'd really appreciate it if you and your men would make sure nothing dead and fugly sneaks up on us in there," he inclined his face in agreement as she pulled a data pad from her blouse pocket, "\_Deoxy \_has some pretty accommodating corridors so everyone should be comfy," she motioned to the humans, "Forward, right," then to the Sangheili, "rear, left. Let's get in, get out, and get the \_fuck\_ back home, ladies and gentleman."

The humans gave a common call of agreement and it appeared they were finally done simply preparing to do this.

From the corner of his eye, Heth saw Iruu glance over his shoulder and survey the assemblage as he stepped to the opening, his eyes lingering on the female they called \_Whittaker. \_She smiled at him again and gave the slightest of nods and he returned the expression.

The irony of his brother's fondness for a \_human\_ female was enough to make Heth's stomach turn.

\* \* \*

><p>To say she was uncomfortable with Hilda's last-minute request would have been an understatement. 'Loram had been invaluable to the mission thus far, but the idea of leaning so heavily on him again was a bit annoying. Steele had certainly learned to dislike Sangheili considerably less because of him, and when it came down to it, she had stopped thinking of the Command Officer as an obligatory tag-along and had started seeing him as a member of her team, sort of.<p>

A single, green triangular marker pointed the way on HUDs as the teams began making their way through the ship. Zeta followed 'Loram as Kessler's men and women held the right forward movement and the Sangheili troops swept anything to the left and rear. It was shaping up to be an easy snatch and grab, but Steele knew how fast well laid plans could go pear-shaped.

The shuffle of feet against the deck and the ruffle of clothing were the only sounds which gave away their presence. \_Deoxy's \_insides looked a lot like a doll house which had been toppled and then

righted. Light fixtures were skewed, and random bits of junk littered the floor in odd places: pieces of broken glass, a crushed Styrofoam cup, a stool, a desk drawer, a lone boot; some places were intermittently streaked and dotted with dried Flood goo.

Despite Hilda's effort at getting the temperature stable, it was uncomfortably hot. Though the air was being filtered it had a faint, burnt electrical smell, with a hint of chemicals, and a liberal dash of stench which everyone knew to be the Flood. Every now and then, a muffled screech would echo from a vent covering warning of the pissed off creature at some unintelligible end of the duct.

Juncture after juncture, everything went seamlessly and 'Loram never once had to slow his steps. When everyone settled into neat lines flanking the double doors that would open to the bridge, Beth couldn't help but smirk when he twisted his head to one side, cracking his neck before disappearing in a shimmering veil of active camouflage.

"Construct," she heard him growl.

The locks came loose with a hollow \_thunk \_and the doors parted, receding into the walls and everyone rushed forward, taking up offensive positions.

Iruu moved just inside the doors as he eyed a putrid form at a low bank of consoles. Jay stood in the center of the expansive room, casually trying each of the void screens. Her form still resembled that of a human, somewhat...skin slack against her frame, dark hair pulled back, and tattered clothing hanging heavily soiled against the seepage of rotting fluids. Tentacles coiled at her misshapen feet but her face remained generally untouched.

The teams filed into the room and split off to various tiers of the deck, surrounding her in an arc. What was left of the woman tilted her head curiously from one side to the other at the happening, her hand still resting on a terminal.

"All this, for me?" she droned, slowly circling around, letting her eyes, rather, \_eye\_, drift across the assemblage.

Though well concealed, Iruu carefully timed his movements to her averted attention, making his way to the command consoles near the empty Captain's chair. He observed every movement and tick the woman made.

Iruu had carried out the Inquisitor's Rite on countless occasions, officially and not. The technique required a certain degree of finesse. One never really knew how much time one would have to size up a mark; it could be seconds, hours—days; it could be through casual social interactions, civil customs, or watching from the shadows. The physical act was one he had practiced endlessly on brush rats and wild dogs and other marks before the Council asked him to do it in any official capacity. Iruu had later developed a habit of going through the motions with available enemies and insubordinates during the Great War for the sheer enjoyment of seeing the panic in their eyes.

This Doctor Jay was still somewhat human in composition and as Iruu slipped around the bridge he could reason that those humans he maimed



for his own enjoyment had not experienced such fear in vain.

No, their experiences were about to be quite vindicated.

Jay's skin was the ashen coloration of a rotting human corpse, one arm composed of swollen tentacles which ferruled and twisted like thick, angry vines. The fingers of that limb appeared completely wound together into a fleshy coil that patted the deck. She moved to clasp her hands thoughtfully, resting the properly formed appendage across the wrist of its mangled opposite.

"Doctor Debra Elise Jay, we are under orders from Lord Hood to secure you in accordance with the Wildfire protocol," Steele said evenly.

"Are you, now?" Jay sneered, her eye settling for only a moment on the Chief Warrant Officer before continuing to scan the room, "Hilda," she said in a wet, garbled laugh, "am I to take this show of force as the part where I'm expected to surrender?"

The construct's image flickered and collected as if seated casually in the Captain's chair, "Heavens, no," she said in a deadly whisper.

Jay smiled, only one side of her mouth curled up as she turned bodily to face the AI across a curved bank of equipment.

"Your cooperation in that matter is no longer requested," Hilda crooned.

The infected woman's face fell into a sneer and Iruu slowly braced himself, watching as she shifted on uneven legs and pivoted, craning her neck to look back at Steele, "What is this?" she hissed.

"This is the part where Signe asked me to tell you: I'm sorry," the AI said, her face displaying no sentiment of the sort, "but I can't abide someone who has so clearly lost their objectivity."

As Jay wheeled around, Iruu launched himself, taking hold of a terminal bank and rolling his legs through his arms into the doctor. The woman screeched as his feet came down, locking the masses of her contorted legs to the deck. She whipped her tentacled hand reflexively and his camouflage dissolved as shields overloaded in a hissing fizzle of electricity that danced painfully across his body. He felt his assault harness shatter under the strength of the impact and tiny pieces drive through the barrier of his bodysuit to cut into his chest. With an enraged growl he grabbed for her, claws biting into her skin through the remnant of her clothing as she brought the lash against his hide again with a pop. The weapon tore almost unimpeded through flesh and muscle.

Iruu snarled rage, throwing his weight forward and shoving her to the deck. As he grappled with her, a tentacled hand whipped down and across his back, the armor giving way with ease and the fleshy appendage slicing through his hide. Iruu shifted, finding his right arm suddenly numb and uncooperative he braced his shoulder against Jay's chest, feeling the acidic burn of contaminated fluids in open wounds as he wrapped his other arm securely around her head. She bucked with ridiculous strength, slapping at him wildly as she screamed. With a practiced motion, Iruu tightened his grip and torque

her head to one side, feeling the damaged muscles in his chest and back ache in protest as the desired support in her neck gave way with a satisfying \_crunch\_.

\* \* \*

><p>It was not as if he had never been injured before. Iruu had been shot by a human wielding a shotgun when his shields failed as a Spec Ops Major, a smattering of pockmarked divots across one shoulder were a constant reminder. He had been burned, stabbed, hit with shrapnel, had bones broken, faced numerous, minor lacerations from the Flood. His body read like a laundry list of potential wartime injuries. But this, it was as if the extent of the damage is too great for his brain to fully appreciate. Or, maybe he could not force himself to believe he had been so wounded.<p>

\_He had underestimated his opponent.\_

As Zeta rushed forward Iruu stepped back as they made a cursory check of Jay's vitals and carefully eased her body onto a litter for transport. He began to feel his knees trembling and everything slowed down as sound drained from his head, replaced by a dull ringing in his ears. It hurt to breathe and Iruu looked down to see his hand clenched against the wound in his right chest. Bright purple blood seeped through his fingers and swelled in rhythmic sequence between the cracks and shattered pieces of his armor.

Green and brown fluids covered his chest and shoulder, sliding across his hand and running in rivulets with his own blood.

That's when the pain began to sink in, like fire from a thousand burning pinpoints digging into his wounds.

\_The injuries were contaminated.\_

His eyes dropped and trailed the deck, lifting to Steele as the woman turned. She was in the middle of shouting some order when their gazes met and her facial expression changed. She spoke his name but he barely heard it over the rush of blood in his ears as he struggled to control his breathing. Zeta's team leader turned back and shouted something unintelligible and the remainder of the team looked up as a few ODSs began rushing forward.

Iruu took a shaky step back and bumped into a bank of consoles, a tremor racking him uncontrollably as Danniskovovik stepped across Jay's bound form.

Teddy could see wild, animal panic rise like a tide. He'd seen it thousand times and it always looked the same. Pain became a motive force of its own, the kind of wild torment that makes people mad with the notion of escaping their own skin.

Iruu took a step as if to shy away and his legs crumpled, sending him slamming hard to the deck.

"\_Get those fucking medics over here NOW!" \_Danniskovovik hollered, grabbing the Sangheili's assault harness and struggling against its broken bits, blood, and Flood slime to roll the man off of his primary injury.

The remainder of Zeta and a swarm of ODSs clamored over to help, propping 'Loram awkwardly on his side and hitting his gaping wounds with personal canisters of biofoam. The Sangheili trembled and tensed against the pain of the application, his breathing coming in sharp gasps.

Maggie took hold of his face, shaking him by his mandibles, "Iruu!"

Beth cracked the top off of a canister and slammed one end into his chest, "It's a fucking arterial bleed," she said as she shoved the device further into his chest, injecting the last of the foam before jerking it out and slinging the empty can over her shoulder. She reached for the wound as blood rose in time to his hearts from around the bubbling foam.

"Jesusâ€|this isn't working," Paul added as he leaned over Iruu, bracing his hands over Beth's.

"\_Get more biofoam over here, GODDAMNIT!\_" Teddy roared.

'Loram opened his eyes as Maggie looked down into their flooded depths, black pupils wide and ringed with only a tiny sliver of orange as he blinked vacantly up at her.

Steele called to Whittaker, "Just try to keep him calmâ€|"

Maggie nodded as she began petting his face and tried to think of something to say. ODSs made their way over with medkits and the collective began trying to shore up the wounds.

Iruu fought, shoving against the deck with the uninjured arm that was pinned beneath him.

Biofoam was a thing of beauty on the battlefield but it was also a cold hard bastard.

Everyone grappled with him as he struggled, "No, noâ€|\_no\_," Maggie said as he snapped weakly at her arms and she dodged his teeth as Teddy and two ODSs moved to push his neck and shoulder securely against the floor.

His breathing became irregular as he squirmed, legs trashing as he balled up and snarled miserably, bellowing raw torment as he locked eyes with Danniskovovik and tried to heave against the big human. Teddy pushed back, earning him an accusatory jeer, "\_Demon\_," Iruu hissed.

They were so close to having the bleeding under controlâ€|if he would stopâ€|

'Loram began to draw up, his face twisted in pain just before he took a choking breath and his entire body tensed.

Maggie curled over his head and pressed her face against his cheek, "It's okay" she murmured, "you're gonna' be okay, Iruuâ€|"

His mandibles trembled, "\_Neshum\_", \_he said in response, jerking his face away from her, "\_You have been judged unclean\_â€|"

Whittaker shook her head, "No," she sobbed as his breathing caught in painful hiccups and his eyes went vacant and glassy.

"\_Do not touch meâ€|with yourâ€|filthyâ€|"\_

\* \* \*

><p>It took only seconds for his brother to have the doctor secured. But what happened in those moments was far more delightful than Heth could have hoped.<p>

\_Arrogant and imprudent, indeed.\_

Iruu was wounded, struck by the Parasite. And now he was being defiled by the humans' attempts to save him. His tormented screams were a symphony to Heth's ears. The virulence of the Flood's contamination in open wounds was widely known. Many fine soldiers under Heth's command had killed themselves in the madness that followed to escape the agony of septic infection.

But, for Iruu, suicide was forbidden.

He could possibly live at the hands of the \_humans\_, maimed and uselessâ€|but he could die of his wounds, very slowly, very painfully, and finally be thrown into the darkest pit of hells where he belonged. Either way, Iruu was going to suffer.

His Field Master stepped forward but Heth held out a hand, "Leave him," he snarled.

The man looked from his Commander to the wounded Sangheili writhing against the deck under a sea of humans, "The Terms of Alliance prohibit this," he hissed, "That they do this to him is not honorable."

"It is \_fitting\_, " Heth sneered, turning to the rest of his men, "We are done here."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>19 October 2563<br>Beta Centauri System  
>Proximity of Ambrosia II<br>\*\*\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1800 Zulu\*\*

\_Miss Kitty \_set down in the hangar and the landing gear was secured against the deck with a characteristic jolt. The craft jerked sharply against the mechanical tethers.

Seconds ticked past.

Iruu could hear muted voices as his senses returned as in a thick fog. It smelled of blood and chemicals, he was cold, someone was touching his face.

He grunted, trying to force himself awake. It hurt but the pain that shot across him was more a dull throb than anything: his body's warning of just how much damage had been done and how much it was going to hurt to move. He laid there for a few moments, remembering enough to know the mission had been successful and that he had been

injured but uncertain as to how he had gotten to the familiar human dropship.

Opening an eye, he saw Maggie peering down at him. He was propped on his side as she cradled his head in her lap, a sad smile twisting her face as he blinked. He found himself trying to smile back up at her as she ran her hand down the length of his face and curled herself over him to touch her lips to his cheek.

Drawing a breath and shifting to sit up, Iruu felt his body protest, his chest and back spiked with sharp needles of pain.

"Don't," Maggie said softly, pressing her face to his, "You're hurt."

This observation struck him as amusing, "I am aware," he responded wryly.

He felt her smile against his face, "You got your ass kicked," she whispered.

"That," he grunted, "was not the point of the exercise," it hurt to laugh.

He felt her smile break, "It's okay," she finally said, the words sounding more a reassurance to herself than for his benefit, "they can fix it."

Iruu grumbled, wincing as he twisted his neck to look down his chest. His right arm had been immobilized, bound to his side and wrapped across his stomach. Blood was crusted against broken armor and curls of damaged bodysuit. Hasty bandages did little to conceal a stained foamy substance that leaked from cracks. He imagined the rest of the injuries looked much the same.

Maggie's trembling hand crept along his disabled arm, "It's not that bad," her voice quaked. He smiled, hearing the reassurance in the lie. He took her hand and press it against his face. "They can fix it," she said again.

Iruu softly shook his head against her palm, "They will do no such thing," he rumbled, "I live or I die, as I am."

"But," she protested.

He shook his head again, dropping her hand to cup the side of her face as he slid his fingers into her hair. A disgraced man, knowing he had lived to be the kind no kindred would mourn: Iruu smiled up at Maggie and softly wiped away a line of tears with a thumb, "You honor me with these."

## 18. Chapter 18

### Chapter Eighteen

\*\*19 October 2563

>Beta Centauri System<br>Proximity of Ambrosia II

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*1930 Zulu\*\*

"What exactly did he do to her?" Steele asked, turning the data pad sideways and peering at it from a different angle.

The Chief Warrant Officer was standing in the medical bay, flanked by Lieutenant Commander Gates and a cryo pod. A quick shower, a cup of coffee, and hour or so after arriving back on Fury, Beth had roused her team for the post-contact medical screenings. Standing protocol called for such check-ups following any contact with the Flood but Steele hesitated at having Zeta report immediately. She had come to respect 'Loram way too much to have her team parade around covered in his blood.

Not that he seemed to really care too much about being heedless of late. Steele wasn't sure what the hell had happened between Maggie and the Command Officer on Ambrosia II, but whatever it was had been pretty out there and on display. Then again—facing death did tend to do that to people—and, well, aliens were people too she figured.

In the end, all Iruu had wanted was to get to his feet with some dignity. From there he had made it clear he intended to make it to his quarters under his own power. Beth had to give him determination. Sangheili or otherwise, he was pretty mangled and even with the rate at which they were capable of healing he was going to hurt for a while, if he survived.

"I mean, I can see that her neck is broken, but, what did he do?" Steele clarified.

She, like the rest of Zeta, was dressed semi-casually in a short-sleeve PT shirt, long-pants, and battered tennis shoes. Everyone had been segregated into curtained off areas for blood-draws and mucus swabs, followed by a round of questioning and overall physical evaluations. Waiting for clearance to leave, Beth succumbed to morbid curiosity upon hearing the attending conversing with a member of his staff about the unique nature of Doctor Jay's injury.

She had seen a lot of weird, freaky stuff in her time: close calls and near death; wounds that should have been deadly ending with full recovery, injuries that should have been survivable turning out not to be. But this, this was beyond any of that. Whatever the Command Officer did, he damn sure did it.

Jay had been a seeping pile of dead weight, mumbling and screeching incoherently.

Good vitals.

Clearly alive.

The ODSs had come in handy, helping get 'Loram stable and bandaged, and assisting in getting the whole bloody mess to Miss Kitty. The Sangheili troops had skipped out, leaving the humans to the grunt work. They had been buttoned up in the dropship waiting to return to Defiance while everyone else got settled and the engineers began collapsing the umbilicus to Deoxy and getting geared up for a series of space walks.

Gates pointed to a white cluster of webbed markings low on the captured x-ray image of Jay's neck, "He completely splintered the C5 causing damage to the spinal cord," the Lieutenant Commander tapped the surface and it ballooned, "These dark lines, those are lesions but the injury is incomplete. She has full upper and lower motor neuron paralysis: she can't move a thing below the C5, except" he turned the device in Steele's hand and tapped the surface and the image receded and was replaced by a colorful brain scan. The lower section of the screen showing several wavy lines, "this is the readout of pre-cryo stimulus tests and what they indicate is that the overlying injury resulted in paralysis without sensory deprivation."

"Soâ€|she can feel but she can't move," Beth said more to herself, remembering 'Loram's explanation of the Inquisitor's Rite and not thinking that was even possible, \_I'll be damnedâ€|the son of a bitch really did it.\_

"Knowing he intentionally did this, I can say with confidence it is one of the most sadistically beautiful injuries I've ever seen," Gates said, taking his data pad and tucking it into a pocket, "I can't even begin to tell you how astronomically low the chances of such an injury having those results would be."

"One in several hundred \_billion\_," Hilda added somberly, materializing on the opposite side of the cryo pod, "Unless, of course, it's at the hands of the Command Officer."

Beth shifted as an aide approached the Lieutenant Commander with a proffered data pad for his appraisal. The man excused himself with a curt nod and stepped away, "What's gonna' keep her from fixing herself?" Beth asked, "I've seen people with their heads blown off taken over by the Flood. I thought that was an issue of sufficient mass not of structural integrity."

Hilda shrugged, "We already know that even if a host is missing body parts or their spine is broken it can be assumed. The Flood just forces connection from its place in the chest wall to limbs to make a body operable. But, she can't regenerate neural connections through the cervical spine via the Flood genome. This," she pointed at the cryo pod, its tiny window speckled on the inside with webs of creeping ice, "was Jay's bodyâ€|she wasn't assuming another: it was the only go at this thing she had."

Beth gave the AI a smile, "You did this on purpose."

"I absolutely did," the construct agreed, "Command gets her alive; and she gets to spend the rest of her life being little more than a brain at someone else's mercy."

Steele shook her head, "Remind me never to piss you off."

\* \* \*

><p>Yellowed light flickered from the ceremonial candles and threw swathes of shadow and cones of light across the walls in the darkened room. Iruu could feel unconsciousness pulling at him as he struggled to remain focused enough to make a final petition to his ancestors.<p>

Stripping himself of his armor had been an exercise in frustration. The bandages and associated materials were tacky with half-dried blood and some foul smelling foam that clung to everything. He had little functional use of his right arm and every movement ached down to his bones, but Iruu managed to shed the plates and leave them stacked in a semi-contained pile next the desk before attempting communion with the disgraced departed.

The humans had done a fine job of attempting to see to his injuries. Despite a copious amount of sticky, foamy, overly medicinal smelling goop which had been applied to abrasions and lacerations that covered his body in random places and leaked from the trauma to his chest, they had done little more than what was to be expected.

The wound to his chest was held together with dermal staples spaced far enough for drainage but close enough to keep the injury from pulling itself apart. He dared not try to twist his head around to look, but he could imagine something similar was going on with the deep laceration to his back.

Part of him began to believe he would not succumb to the maddening sickness of contamination, that whatever the humans had defiled him with had been sufficient to manage the injury. But, as time passed, Iruu began shivering against fever and every joint began to ache. The level of physical pain rose to one incomparable to anything 'Loram had ever experienced, surpassing what he had only recently gone through. He found himself understanding why those he had known who suffered such injuries chose to end their own lives.

Just a few hours after contact, his wounds were already pulling painfully at the staples and had begun oozing yellowed purulence. He could feel the rhythm of his hearts across every swollen cell of his damaged hide. The incessant throb made it incredibly difficult to concentrate, and in the end, Iruu decided whatever it was he had to say to the dead he could do so in person when he got there.

Covered in sweat and panting in shallow breaths against the agony, Iruu shifted to sit on the floor and gritted his teeth as he felt the staples in his back tear loose like the opening of a macabre zipper. It was a perverse release but a searing torment. 'Loram was prepared to audibly beg for loss of consciousness as he sank to the prayer mat.

He sat there trembling and became painfully aware that dying in battle, dying at a comrade's hand, and the privilege of killing one's self were honorable for injured men not for their ritual significance—but for all the things it kept one from being reduced to.

It was not proper to die in this manner, quivering like a frightened bird.

Unable to stand the thought of being discovered this way, Iruu shakily scooted to retrieve a small box from beneath the desk. It contained an assortment of tools for making menial checks and repairs to his armor. Scattering the contents clumsily on the floor beside him, the Sangheili picked through the various implements with an unsteady hand until he found one he could use.

Setting the tool aside, Iruu began struggling to undo the zips at the



feet of his bodysuit. As his head swam, the room spun and 'Loram fully came to terms with the idea that he would die.

"Hilda," he rasped, choking back nausea at the blinding pain of graceless, agonizing movement, feeling blood and infected ooze as it trailed his hide and dripped onto the hardwood.

"Yes, Command Officer," the AI answered softly, without manifesting an image. She was unsure if it was intended as a sign of respect for whatever he wanted or if he was simply far enough gone not to notice he had called her by name.

He had managed to strip himself naked, discarding the torn bodysuit near the stack of armor before clamoring against the chair to stand. With his right arm unsupported, Iruu clutched his hand to his stomach to stabilize the appendage, but every swing and sway of his body caused his damaged muscles to throb and give out with agonizing tremors. His legs wobbled and his head pounded as he began making his way to the head, steadying himself against the furniture, the wallsâ€|

"Tell the Ambassadors," he said through gritted teeth, alien tool gripped tightly in his hand, "I do not wish my ashesâ€|to return to Sanghelios."

He leaned against the door frame, knees giving out and sinking back to the floor with a groan. He hauled himself painfully across the floor, eyeing the shower through blurry vision. As he crawled partially in, he set the tool aside and jerked the shower knob, sending a spout of diffused water across his head.

It was so cold it burned but he lugged himself in as best he could and curled awkwardly into the stall too small for his size, "Let the Arbiter know," he panted, "I am honored he wouldâ€|offer to harbor me among his ancestors," he held the tool with white-knuckled grip as he steeled himself against the pain as best he could, "but I have no placeâ€|among his venerated dead."

Hilda was silent for a moment, then, "As you have said it," she answered reverently, "so it will be done."

Iruu smiled at her words, feeling the temperature of the water climb to a more tolerable level as he lifted the tool.

\* \* \*

><p>"What are the chances he'll survive, Shawn?" Maggie asked, her face turned to L'shi as the child slept in her arms.<p>

Whittaker was sitting on a neatly made medical bed, tucked into a back corner of the med bay. The lights in the immediate area were dimmed and someone had put up a temporary privacy sheet to keep from waking the girl. Maggie had found her, already sleeping, and cradled her as tightly as she dared; softly humming a tune until Ensign Hursch had poked his head around the curtain.

When he had stepped back to check on L'shi, he knew the dark shadow he saw sitting on the bed as he approached belonged to Maggie. He brought over a chair and placed himself a respectful distance away. Before he had managed to settle himself in the seat, the Staff

Sergeant had whispered her question.

She probably had no idea how loaded it was.

Though they were significant traumas, the injuries themselves were not his enemy. Sangheili had four pectoral muscle groups where humans had two, and it was likely the arterial bleed was a tertiary artery that supplied the overlying muscle structure. While completely fatal if left immediately untreated, loss of that blood supply would not be detrimental in the long run.

Arteries had a muscular wall which could constrict blood flow when damaged, and the anti-hemorrhagic feature of the biofoam was probably enough to let the artery close itself off. Tissue regenerative qualities aside, 'Loram would lose strength if the muscle was ruptured, which it likely was, and not surgically repaired, but collateral circulatory supplies would be more than sufficient on their own. Sangheili were pretty damn good at healing.

But, it wasn't about the \_injuries\_: it was his body's immune response would be the greatest threat.

From what was known of the species' biology and physiology, the probable wounds the Command Officer had sustained, and the general toxicity of associated Flood mucous membranes, Hursch was honestly hesitant to even try to guess at his chances of survival.

Sangheili's blood derived its coloration from the dual metallic base structures. Cells within the blood were blue cobalt along with red iron. This gave them the ability to produce and utilize almost twice as many white blood cells as humans and the ability to absorb high levels of the vitamin B12. Overall, it helped them heal faster and added to an already accelerated metabolism.

Naturally occurring cobalt gave their systems an antimicrobial and antibacterial property and it was believed this is why, as a species, they had no known degenerative, communicable, or malignant diseases. It was also considered a viable reason they could survive exposure to radiation in quantities that would kill most humans, not to mention causing genetic damage on a cellular level.

But, there was a down side to this superiority.

Those who suffered significant injuries combined with exposure to the level and diversity of bacterial contamination offered by the Flood were prone to exaggerated systemic immune responses. Medically speaking, infection in a contaminated wound was not strictly a bad thing, it was an indication that the immune system was doing its job. But, on the flip side, Sangheili never evolved natural temperance to their immune reactions.

Standing knowledge from accounts indicated that the Elites' systemic response overwhelmed their own bodies in an attempt to fight off the Flood contamination, which would lead to more infection. This likely ended in contamination of the blood, organ failure, coma, and death. However, all of this was unfounded because, from allied reports, Sangheili chose to commit suicide rather than endure the misery. Just how successful their systems could be at winning such a battle, or how quickly they would succumb to septic shock, was unknown.

And, well, Zeta and the ODS'Ts \_had\_ stuffed 'Loram full of biofoam.

"\_Survive?\_" he repeated, waging a glance up at her.

Maggie just cringed weakly at his answer.

Hursch came across as a gentle soul; he would probably make one hell of an attending. Like Lieutenant Commander Gates, he was soft spoken and seemed to have no problem talking to enlisted or taking extra time to explain things. It was a quality that would make or break him as a doctor.

"Well," the Ensign tried, "that depends on a lot of factors."

She nodded. Whittaker, like all of Spec Ops, was certified as a combat medic. It was never her specialty field, but it was knowledge that could come in handy. She had no way of knowing how much blood Iruu had lost or how much he could lose, but she was fairly certain he was grievously injured, and biofoam was only intended as emergency first aid...it was never designed to be sufficient on its own.

Maggie felt the overwhelming weight of too much loss and death: too many times in which she put off saying and doing what she felt she should have because it could be fixed \_later\_. Not that she had a clue exactly what she would have said to 'Loram. A part of her still wanted the chance to explain, to say the things she felt but was afraid to put into words, no matter how ridiculous it sounded.

It wasn't his fault she was so fucked up. It wasn't his fault she was so damn afraid.

And now, all of that fear: of loss, rejection, it had come full circle and, once again, \_later \_was a time not likely to ever arrive.

"I mean," Shawn continued, trying to sort out how to say things without making her obvious anxiety worse, "the Flood is \_nasty\_. We're talking massively contaminated fluids emanating from necrotic tissue in an open wound hereâ€|"

Maggie shook her head.

"If he can stave off sepsis, he'll be okay."

"And there's nothing else we can do?"

She already knew the answer, but she needed to hear it from someone with a greater understanding of the species.

Shawn gave her a crooked smile, "No," he said softly, "You guys crammed him full of biofoam," he shrugged, "I mean, under the Terms of Alliance, even that could be seen as crossing the lineâ€|you guys probably saved his life with that, but I wouldn't expect him to be thankful. They tend to glorify death."

A wry smile pulled at Maggie's lips, "\_Death is not preferred over living\_," she said.

Hursch raised his eyebrows and Whittaker ruefully shook her head, "That's just," she smiled for a moment then seemed to choke back her emotions, "something he said."

'\_There are things to live for.'\_

Like going \_home\_â€|which he could never do; like \_watching\_ his sons grown up\_â€|but they were all dead; likeâ€|

Maggie sniffed back tears, realizing by his own admission, Iruu had very\_ little\_ to live for.

She looked down at L'shi and the child poked out her bottom lip then pipped in her sleep.

Whittaker had always been selfish, but it hurt to know she had been so close to \_begging\_ him to go against his personal convictionsâ€|that she wished she \_had\_. She was so many more things than she ever imagined. And, though Steele had tried to convince her that the \_why\_ \_didn't\_ matter when it was all said and doneâ€|Maggie couldn't help but wonder.

Why did she want him to live so badly?

Why did it matter so much to her if he died?

What could she possibly hope to offer himâ€|did she have anything he would really want?

'\_I would not have hurt youâ€|that is not what I wantedâ€|'\_

Maggie bit down on her bottom lip, finally hearing just what he had said.

L'shi squirmed and smacked, then rolled over in Maggie's arms and went on sleeping.

"What will they do with her?" Whittaker asked weakly, needing to think about something else, \_anything\_ \_else.

Hursch smiled, "She'll be in good hands," he said, self assurance filling his voice.

Maggie looked up and gave him a critical appraisal, noting the mischievous sparkle to his eyes. He simply shrugged, boyish grin filling his face.

"They asked you toâ€|"

He interrupted, scoffing a laugh, "ONI doesn't really \_ask\_ \_anythingâ€|"

"I apologize," Hilda said, speaking quietly so as not to disturb the child, "But, Staff Sergeant..."

Whittaker cast her glance up to the ceiling while Hursch looked around, "Yeah," she answered curiously.

The AI paused for a second, knowing full well she had already crossed

many ethical lines, and was once again pushing their boundaries. She knew what she was about to say wasn't completely trueâ€|but it wasn't necessarily a \_lie \_either, "Command Officer 'Loram is asking for you."

\* \* \*

><p>Eugene McGregor stood at a window and looked out at <em>Deoxy. <em>From this distance, he could barely make out the docking platform, like a mosquito on the hide of a prize hog. He couldn't make out the engineers as they began the second phase of \_their \_mission: to restore strategic hull integrity so that the research carrier would be suitable for slip, and the eighteen-plus hour jump back to Sol. Hilda had done her part, calculating where repairs were needed and directing the show from HUDs and data pads. They were looking at a twelve to twenty hour delay if the crews worked straight through until completion.

"Captain."

"Yes, Hilda," McGregor answered, not moving from his spot, hands folded neatly in his back, whites crisp as ever.

"All of the files have been cataloged and assigned fragmentary security for transmission to headquarters. I have completed my final communicuÃ© for Lord Hood and for the Sangheili Ambassadors and the Arbiter, should they be necessary."

"Eager to put this all behind you?" he asked, twisting his head to one side as the AI appeared standing in the wide, empty hall.

With a single nod, "I am."

He knew part of the 'files' Hilda was referring to were her memories, well, Signe's, Tollovinski's, and pretty much the entire Double Helix project. It was the \_gift \_of her programming and the reason her expected life-cycle was slightly extended: once files had been received by headquarters and they gave the signal, she could \_choose \_to forget.

Eugene pursed his lips, turning back to the window, "Me too."

\* \* \*

><p>She had to keep herself from outright sprinting. Making her way from the medbay, Maggie didn't even bother stopping at the lift. She hit the door to the closest stairway and climbed the steps as fast as possible.<p>

She pushed through the door onto A-Deck and jogged the wide hall until she came to a familiar, polished wooden door.

Maggie tapped hastily at its surface.

Nothing: not so much as a shuffle beyond.

She knocked again, more forcefully, and leaned an ear against the heavily lacquered surface.

No footsteps, no Sanhgeili grumbles, just a muffled sound reminiscent

of putting ones ear to a seashell.

Eyeing the exterior knob carefully, and shoving aside a twinge of trepidation at what she was about to do, Whittaker reached. Even with Hilda's reassurances, barging in on someone's personal space was monumentally uncouth but...

\_'You are welcome to disturb me any time.'\_

The knob turned, balked for the slightest of seconds against the interior retaining mechanism, and then twisted free. Whittaker felt both relief and a new tickle of anxiety as she pushed the door open a crack and peered into the darkened room beyond. The shaft of light which fell into the room illuminated only a neatly made corner of a bed and a bare side table.

"Iruu?" she called, poking her head into the quarters, her body still lingering out in the hall.

Again, no answer.

Maggie stepped in and pushed the door closed behind her. As the pillar of light at her back shrank to nothing and blinked out with the soft \_thunk\_ of wood against frame, Whittaker found herself swallowed in diffused darkness and soft warmth. She blinked, trying to get her eyes adjusted, noticing the faint flicker of a dying candle from the tall dresser top as it cast shadows along the wall and spilled faint light into a tiny wedge of the room.

The air was thick and humid, and sticky with undertones of tar and oil. She could hear the sound of a running shower.

"Iruu?" she said loudly.

Nothing.

The door to the head was open, but Maggie stood rooted in place for a few moments twiddling her fingers as she stared at the powdery darkness. Eyes slowly adjusting, she could see rivulets of condensation against the outer room's walls.

She began to make out the sharp outline of armor pieces discarded against the floor in a collapsed pile near the desk, a wad of bodysuit, tangled bandages, a badly damaged assault harness, what she took to be a tipped and thoroughly rummaged toolbox spilling its alien contents across the floor.

Squinting, Maggie turned and hit the light panel on the wall behind her.

Clearly adjusted for his comfort, illumination rose to a tranquil dim, but it was enough for Whittaker to see everything smeared and dribbled with bloody fluids.

The drips and smudges proceeded in a clumsy trail to the head, handprints against the wall drawn down against trails of condensation like a child's painting.

Maggie felt her pulse race.

"Iruu," she called loudly, forcing herself forward, hands blindly seeking the light panel just inside the other door.

As the light climbed, Whittaker could see him through the foggy cloud, slumped against the wall of the shower, legs and feet hanging out onto the tiled floor. His body was curled at an unnatural angle, uninjured shoulder crammed against a corner, neck craned, mandibles slack as the shower pelted the jagged, open wound on his chest and a steady stream of blood, separating into hues of greenish and yellow, swirled toward the drain.

Maggie rushed forward, awkwardly stepping around Iruu's legs as she reached in to jerk the knob, halting the shower. Pipes squawked, rumbling the wall panel, and the Sangheili issued a low, defensive hiss. Whittaker squatted down, carefully taking an alien pair of very obvious pliers from his open hand as his fingers trembled to curl around the implement.

"No, it's okay," she whispered, seeing the glint of twisted staples and armor bits glittering across the shower floor.

Very much the wounded, cornered creature, he weakly snapped his mandibles at her, body trembling as he tried to shift away with a whining growl.

\_Shit, \_she thought, letting her gaze fall to the ragged, gaping wound. He had pulled the staples out.

"It's okay," she said again, gently reaching to pet his face as she leaned to try to get a look at the other injury. Maggie saw a similarly mangled, open gash running down Iruu's shoulder and disappearing across his back. The tiny dermal bands still clung at odd angles to tattered flesh.

The edges of both wounds were torn and uneven, the skin puffed and angry with lines of blanched scales curling back like sickening flower blooms away from the dark purple channels. The sour smell of infection lingered against the already pungent scent of Sangheili blood.

\_Shit\_.

"Okay, okay," Whittaker said, trying to collect herself.

His mandibles twitched as he grumbled something in Sangheili before bunting her arm with his snout and weakly licking her hand.

Maggie patted his cheek and briefly rested her forehead against his before reaching to pick the staples and armor fragments from the shower floor.

She then took Iruu's undamaged arm and tugged at him, trying to get him to sit up. He complied with a disgruntled whine and Whittaker toed at his legs with her foot, "Scoot your feet that way, no, underâ€¦I need you toâ€¦" he barked angrily, eyes closed, and shifted, pushing her back as he folded his legs underneath himself and staggered to his knees, winding up crammed in the shower with his neck craned against the wall, head hung in obedient agony.

That wasn't exactly what she was going for, but it would

work.

Maggie grabbed the tool and began carefully pulling the ruptured staples from his back. Every now and then he would hiss or grind his teeth in complaint, or shift with a growl. Otherwise, 'Loram was as passive as a lamb, incoherently muttering as Whittaker kept gently removing the twisted dermal bands and dropping them into the trash until the last one came free.

She turned the water back on to rinse the wound and left to retrieve the small med kit which was neatly affixed to the wall near the quarter's door. The injury was hideous now. Inflamed purple tissue had swollen to the point of splitting open, the staples tearing to create jagged edges with scaled skin curled back at the many seams.

The running water had rinsed the wound clean, but Maggie turned off the shower and carefully touched the swollen flesh ringing the injury. Iruu mumbled and his hide twitched of its own accord as if trying to shake off her touch. The surrounding skin was hot but as she worked her way around it gave off very little signs of infection. Maggie noticed that the minor abrasions which fell across his shoulders and legs were already trying to heal over. Their surfaces were covered with a thin layer of shiny, purplish skin mottled with what she figured were gray scale buds.

Iruu didn't take well to having the wound doused with an antibacterial solution, but all he could manage was a hiss in protest and more Sangheili grumbling. Maggie wasn't sure which idea bothered her more: that he was incoherent and might consider this some form of torture, or that he was possibly delirious and not even aware he was still alive.

But, he \_was \_still alive.

Maggie bandaged the wound as best she could then draped the towel over his shoulder before poking and prodding Iruu to sit back on his haunches. He snorted and twitched his mandibles and grumpily complied, leaning his shoulder against the far wall and slumping into the corner as she looked the primary injury over.

However long he had been passed out with water running over his chest had clearly done some good. The wound was inflamed but did not give any indication of infection. Lumps of severed muscle had receded under the skin and dotted the surface with blood-stains which appeared like black webs from beneath the dark gray flesh.

Iruu had managed to tear the staples out with all the precision of a toddler having taken scissors to their hair, the outer lines appearing little better than on the opposing laceration.

Once she had finished bandaging him, Maggie patted at his hide with a fresh towel and began trying to get him to stand up. He was just as unhappy about moving as before, but eventually complied with intermittent muttering and managed to stagger out of the shower and step through the door into the main room.

'Loram made it to the bed and justâ€¦sort ofâ€¦crumpled at a weird angle across it, the supports groaning and creaking loudly. With an angry slew of foreign words in response, Iruu shifted half on his



side with his feet dangling off into space. Whittaker covered him up with blankets and propped his right arm on a pillow before parking herself on the edge of the bed. What she wanted was to get Hursch up here with a massive dose of antibiotics and start an IV, but that was out of the question. Though she found it difficult, Maggie had to force herself to accept this was as good as it was going to get, better than she had feared.

'\_I live or die, as I am.'\_

She sat on the edge of the bed and watched as Iruu fell into a regular pattern of breathing, snoring intermittently.

That was the point at which she could have walked out and left him be, but Whittaker couldn't force herself to move to the door. She wanted to believe what Hilda had said was the truth, but part of her knew the AI had deliberately misinterpreted incoherent rambling; and there was an odd comfort in that.

Maggie walked to the head and sopped up water and blood from the floor instead of leaving, eventually making her way back out into the main room with her cleaning.

Iruu continued sleeping soundly as she cleaned up the dried mess on the floor and wiped smudges from walls before depositing the dirty towels in a pile in a corner. There was a mat that was hopelessly stained in front of the dresser, but she rolled it neatly and set it aside, turning to see the tiny, dying flame of a candle still burning on the dresser top. It was one of three. One had gone out a long time ago, if it had been lit at all; and the other had burst from one side, leaking a puddle of wax across the dresser to run down one side, the rivulet ending in sharp, frozen drops that stopped just short of the floor, the flame long dead. Four stone figures sat in a puddle of cooled wax atop the dresser, each a different shade and all distinctive in small ways.

Having grown up in a Catholic household, Maggie recognized them for what they were: prayer figures, saintsâ€|or whatever the Sangheili equivalent would be. She wiggled one from its waxen foothold and turned it in her hand. It was black, carved from volcanic glass, and very clearly an Elite, but not an armored kind or anything she recognized as contemporary.

Whittaker set the figure back down and folded her arms across the edge of the dresser top, briefly considering making some appeal to this unknown, alien icon. She laughed at her own foolishness. She hadn't prayed to anything or anyone since before, \_that \_night. God or the Saints weren't listeningâ€|that or they were just make-believe.

With a long, weary sigh, Maggie let her arms fall from the dresser as she turned. Iruu was unmoving, save the gentle rise and fall of his breathing.

She walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, wanting to touch him, not wanting to disturb him.

After watching for what felt an eternity, satisfied he was really stable, Maggie eased herself down, curling up on the edge of the mattress. Before finally succumbing to her own exhaustion, she

reached out and put her hand in his.

## 19. Chapter 19

### Chapter Nineteen

\*\*20 October 2563

>Beta Centauri System<br>Proximity of Ambrosia II

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*

><strong>\_\*\*0330 Zulu\*\*

The silken blackness of unconsciousness slipped away like a watery veil. Iruu's eyelids felt heavy against the intoxicating comfort of healing rest as the sounds and sensations around him slowly seeped into his brain.

Human ships were so much more noisy than Covenant vessels. The ventilation system serving the room to which he had been allotted, while generally suitable, was inadequate when it came to containing scents. There was an acoustic whirring sound as air was pushed and pulled throughout and 'Loram could discern the various human aromas from all over. The most overwhelming smell was of the soaps humans used to wash their linens: harsh, overly chemical smells dampened only slightly by the musky fragrance of his ceremonial candles, the scent that was his own, andâ€|Maggie.

Iruu cast off the varied emotions in that thought. A tangle of images clogged his head, which ones were memory and which ones were complete, dreamlike fabrications he was unable to immediately tell.

He had been home, or some hellish facsimile. Not \_his \_home, not the apartment he kept, much to Mother's dismay, in the city proper of Nustaad, but the home Srina 'Loram and his Uncle shared: the home Iruu had grown up in. Only, instead of being comforted by his loved ones, it had turned into the kind of nightmare in which one slowly realizes they are completely alone, as if everyone near and dear has just suddenly vanished.

Intertwined were moments of waking misery: feverish, uncontrollable shaking, naked in an alien shower, tearing metallic sutures from his flesh in an attempt to get some relief and make the preparation of his corpse less cumbersome for whomever would have that unenviable taskâ€|all while being left unsure which nightmare was worse, living the agony or facing the hell that had been no doubt reserved for him.

At some point he had been roaming his mother's home, desperately seeking anyone, almost panicked that this would be how he was to spend eternityâ€|only, the person he had begun looking for the most was Maggie.

And, then, she had been there, antagonizing him into moving, painfully helping him see to his injuries. That was a special kind of humiliation all on its own. Not that he believed in his delirium she was actually there, but that he was relieved at the thought of her presence.

Now, he lay in the human bed, feeling rather ashamed of the inert

ramblings of his tortured mind. He focused instead on the softness of the mattress beneath him, entirely too spongy to provide proper support and no doubt sagging under his bulk. Though he had not roused enough to move, Iruu could feel the aches in his body from having lain in the same position for too long.

His wounds itched. His stomach grumbled. He was thirsty.

Wakefulness had come as a clear signal that he had survived but his body had managed to burn through all of its fuel the process. He wasn't certain how he felt about this: being alive.

He would have to acknowledge that his current condition was owed to whatever the humans had used to contain his wounds, which was not a pleasant thought.

His stomach growled painfully. He didn't have the luxury of dwelling on these things right now.

Drawing a breath and waging movement, 'Loram felt his damaged muscles pull against deep, fresh scars as he sank onto his back. The tissues were stiff and motion caused a sharp burning sensation as fibers tore anew and joints popped. Iruu blindly raked his nails across his hide, catching the edges of adhesive strips and pulling them loose. Beneath, he could feel the smooth, waxy texture of new flesh devoid of scales. He carefully scratched: it stung but it felt good at the same time.

Curling his neck to look down as he picked at the remainder of the bandage, he could see the wound had knitted itself as he slept, a wide channel of thin, pinkish skin having filled in between jagged gray edges, lumpy ridges of severed muscle outlining the forming scar. By the time it had finished healing over, and was covered in hastily formed scales, it would definitely be the ugliest of his numerous such marks. Iruu grunted to himself with a smile. Scars were a badge of honor.

Perhaps living would not add too much to his shame. This could be profitable in his position back on Earth.

It wouldn't be as impressive as Military Commander 'Vadum's missing mandibles, or his War College Commandant's missing eye, or Daniel's missing everything. But, standing shirtless with rookies during hand-to-hand training, Iruu's new marks would make being an infamously condemned man in a position of power even more intimidating.

He smiled, yes, he could live with that.

Iruu rolled to sit at the edge of the bed, pitching his legs off the side and slinging his shoulders up as painlessly as possible. He took in the discomfiting blanched color of the walls though the lights were at an acceptable level. 'Loram didn't remember crawling into the human bed; he barely remembered feeling the need to pull the staples from his hide, to rinse himself so that he would at least be somewhat presentable for cremation. He did not at all recall bandaging the wounds.

There was a sound reminiscent of a yawn, and Iruu turned to see Maggie as she snuggled into the warm spot his shoulders had vacated.

Eyes wide, he slowly curled himself around, rising to his feet like a deer preparing to bolt, careful not to disturb her. 'Loram stood looking down, tilting his head in mortified curiosity as she went right on sleeping.

He blinked.

This wasâ€|not something he was in the least bit prepared for. It was certainly not an unwelcome turn of events, and it made some of his dream-memories more clear; butâ€|but, he didn't have any background experiences with waking to find a female in his bed. He had certainly woken in his share, probably \_more\_ than his share, of women's bedsâ€|not that he figured the wall-to-wall bed of a harem chamber really countedâ€|and never had he shared a bed for the explicit purposes of \_sleeping\_â€|thisâ€|was not how these things worked in his cultureâ€|at leastâ€|not for unattached menâ€|

Bedmates were the begrudged and belittled privilege of married or bonded men: something single and uncommitted males often poked fun at them about.

Iruu suddenly felt extremely, uncomfortably odd at the prospect that his dream-memories had been \_actual\_ memories. There were things in his culture that had certain meaning, and a woman bathing a man following injury or return from battle was one of themâ€|a fairly significant one of them. 'Loram screwed up his mandibles before turning away; he had entertained that line of thinking long enough...

Instead, he crept to the little closet tucked in a corner and located his belongings. He winced against the simultaneous movement of crouching and rummaging though he held his right hand to his stomach. Locating a small bag, Iruu gingerly retrieving an oblong tin of field rations. He wound up sitting at the desk using his fully functional arm and his teeth to rip the lid off. His right side was still very painful. He could move his hand and all of his fingers and lift the appendage at the elbow, but attempting motion which called for use of his shoulder and chest muscles was excruciating. Iruu poked at the food-like crackers then decided against portioning them out or eating them as they were.

He stepped to the head and filled the tin with water, returning it to the desk to soak before pilfering his bag again. He could still feel exhaustion tugging at him as he sat and flicked the top off of a small jar and began to work a mineral liniment into his dry skin. He scoured the dead scales that flaked from the hide around the injuries he could reach. It hurt, but it was this or shower again. And that was not acceptable. Whatever process humans used to make their water suitable for drinking and bathing was overly harsh to Sangheili scales. Not even clay soaps imported from the homeworld were effective against the drying effects. It was one of the most common complaints, next to the food, from rookie troops on allied rotation. At least some humans were willing to capitalize on this minor, but highly irritating, discomfort. For all of their incessant meddling with nature, humans were also capable of addressing the problem with balms and oils.

Considerably less itchy, 'Loram retrieved a set of utensils and jabbed mindlessly at his food. The crackers had absorbed the water and swollen to a gray, lumpy, gelatinous mass. The eating implements

were slightly tapered, spiral ringed sticks which made consuming the partially fibrous glop somewhat less unwieldy. He had never gotten use to human eating devices, try as the Ambassadors might to get him to broaden his horizons.

A \_knife\_ he understood, a \_fork\_, not so much, and a \_spoon\_—why in the name of the gods was that even necessary?

Sitting at the desk with his right arm supported against its top, Iruu shoveled the food into his mouth. The container held enough rations for three meals, but he prepared, and finished, the entire contents, in silence, not waging a glance at his occupied bed. He was concerned that if he looked at the sight too much, his mind might to get comfortable with the idea. No, that wasn't quite it—

Grumbling to himself, Iruu stepped to the head and consumed as much water as his stomach would allow, filling the field container from the sink and drinking as much as he could possibly hold. He inspected his teeth in the mirror then, reluctantly turned to look from one room into the other.

Maggie was still asleep, tucked against a pillow with an arm draped from the bedside. Her hair was sticking up at odd angles and she appeared completely unconscious. Humans required a great deal more sleep than Sangheili. At this thought, Iruu yawned, feeling the muscles in his chest burn. His brain was insisting that \_he\_ \_still\_ needed more rest.

With an irritable snort, 'Loram turned off the bathroom light and hit the switch for the main room as he entered it, walking around to the other side of the bed in darkness.

He gave very little thought to his nakedness.

One of the cardinal rules of Sangheili society dictated that if one came uninvited to another's personal space you got them exactly as they were: dressed, naked, anything in between, as a clear signal that your intrusion was not appreciated.

Maggie had already been exposed to that, and had seemed appropriately embarrassed.

Displaying one's degree of physical scarification and complete, unarmed nakedness was a sign of a total lack of fear. Not that \_that\_ \_was\_ his current feeling on the matter: there was simply no need for him to have qualms about being nude in Maggie's presence \_now\_.

The woman had seen him in his most shameful of states; injured, naked, barely conscious...

It wasn't too much of a loss: he had never been a particularly modest man. This turn of events had no bearing on how he saw himself, but it was going to change the way he looked at \_her\_.

Iruu grumbled. He did not wish to think anymore. Carefully crawling atop the mattress, 'Loram heard the supports pop and squeak under his weight as he settled in on his back at an angle and wiggled himself under the blankets.

Maggie gave an exaggerated stretch, scrunching her face as she yawned. She scooted to nestle close to Iruu, letting an arm rest across his stomach as she buried her face in his side. He chuckled softly and shook his head.

\_You have no idea what you are doing, woman.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Teddy was trying to eat his breakfast in peace and quiet, as much as one could in a mess which was beginning to fill. 0600 was still early for someone who had effectively nowhere to be for the next eighteen plus hours, but he had been up since 0400, so he felt like everyone else was slacking. <em>Fury <em>was still lingering near Ambrosia II, but chatter indicated that Hilda would shortly be giving standard, though completely unnecessary, notice that they would be entering slip.

He really loved this meal. Aside from all of that \_most important one of the day \_bull shit, he had always looked forward to breakfast the most. Danniskovovik couldn't be sure if it started when he was sent to live with his grandparents as a kid and how spoiled he had become to Oma's smorgasbord of pretty much any and everything he asked for; or if it happened in boot, when breakfast meant one more day was fully in the rearview; and continued to have that meaning. Probably the latterâ€|because nothing said 'victory' quite like eggs from a bag.

Rolling bacon and eggs into a buttered pancake, Teddy stuffed the food into his mouth just as Paul scooted into the seat opposite, looking disturbingly serious. Sanders brushed jelly on his toast with deliberate, exaggerated movements, cramming the triangular slice into his face and chewing. Danniskovovik was pretty sure he was being mocked as the Sergeant slowly lolled the bread around in his mouth.

Teddy washed his food down with a swig of bitter coffee and leveled his steely gaze at Paul. The other man sipped at his OJ and returned the expression.

"He called you \_'Demon'\_, " Sanders said evenly.

Teddy grunted and looked down at his plate to fork more eggs onto the last of his pancakes.

"Care to elaborate on that?" Paul said, his tone making him sound like a therapist.

Danniskovovik huffed, "Nope."

"Oh, come on," Paul whined, "you were a fucking Spartan, weren't you?" Teddy cocked his brows, face still turned to his food, and looked at Sanders with cold blue eyes as the Sergeant lifted his hands in exasperation, "How do you \_not \_tell anyone that."

\_Because I'm seven feet fucking tall, most people have\_ always \_just assumedâ€|\_

In fact, that assumption had been made most of his military career.

"Because, some men have humility," Steele said, setting her tray down and taking a seat next to the Gunnery Sergeant.

That was only part of it. Beth knew Teddy didn't talk about his short time in the Spartan IV program because he was barely in the program before being forcibly removed for medical reasons. He didn't think that counted as 'being a Spartan'.

Phase three augmentations didn't go as anticipated and Danniskovovik spent nineteen months in various surgeries and recovery efforts while having his lungs completely replaced with cloned organs.

With the program in a much more public light, ONI couldn't risk the negativity of another bout of bad publicity. They had just been dealt the blow of Parangosky's great-grand-nephew disappearing from the fucking Intelligence Academy. So, they patched Teddy up, admitted no wrong doing, never disclosed what exactly had gone wrong, but had no use for him after that.

The truth was more likely that ONI had taken one look at Teddy and gotten really, predictably, greedy.

Already six-foot nine and four hundred and fifty pounds of Norwegian giant, Danniskovovik had been well past the standard age of acceptance into the Spartan program. But, there was a waiver for everything. The first two phases of augmentations had gone as expected, but when they attempted to alter Teddy's pulmonary structures something went very, very wrong and the organs essentially shed their entire inner lining, almost drowning him in his own blood.

Fortunately, they were able to fix him, keep him alive while they grew a replacement set in a lab. Unfortunately, his sixth wife had been unimpressed with the idea of not being married to a Spartan.

In the end, he was better than new, with reinforced skeletal and muscular structures but only three inches taller and a hundred-twenty pounds heavier without the remainder of the augmentations to complete cell growth.

He didn't contest the annulment.

Before Danniskovovik was released from the hospital, he was single again, and Admiral Holley had come, in person, to discuss a transfer into Marine Special Operations. The rest was history.

A more conceited man, Paul Sanders, would probably think of it as some kind of testament to his personal value and not as simple as the collective institution wanting to get a little return on their substantial investment. But, Teddy was not snowed by Holley's flowery words. He was just happy to be useful and get to kick some ass instead of being forced into retirement or set up to jockey a desk. He was cleared for full return to duty just in time for the manhunts to really get underway for the war trials. Beth ran into him on Camp Odin and they had picked up right where they had left off.

Teddy drained his coffee and collected his tray, walking away without a word.

Sanders folded his arms and scowled as Danniskovovik dumped the tray and exited the mess.

"It's a touchy subject, Sergeant," Steele offered, pouring a creamer into her coffee before stirring it with a thin red straw, "Leave it alone," she said sternly.

\* \* \*

><p>Maggie woke from the kind of sleep that was disorienting of its own accord; pulling herself from the dreamless void was almost painful.<p>

Iruu snored.

Whittaker felt her arm rise against his stomach and became aware that her face was buried against his ribs as she opened her eyes. She raised her head to see the creeping light of a time-line synchronized, false sunrise spreading up the walls. With a yawn, she turned to see Iruu's chin resting against his neck as his mandibles twitched in the pretend light of morning. He was laying flat on his back; legs dangling off the bed at the knees, chin craned against his neck impeding his breathing.

Sitting up, Maggie combed her fingers through her hair, looking down to see the massive scar that crept along one side of his chest. The flesh was still trying to mend itself, dotted with misshapen scales; bloodstains webbing various places, creeping beneath the skin and across the knotted ends of torn muscle. It hurt to look at.

\_He was alive, \_Maggie could feel the rise of overwhelming relief at the realization that he was well out of danger, and had clearly been up and moving at some point while she slept.

He snorted, and she leaned away from him. His eyes opened at uneven degrees and he tilted his sleepy gaze to her, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her back with a grumble. She felt a strange panic as she settled herself against him, resting her head on his shoulder. The hide at his collar twitched, tickled by her hair as Iruu sniffed, closed his eyes, and went back to snoring.

\_He was going to make itâ€|\_

All that she had recently feared was untrue. Maggie felt her eyes begin to burn with tears. Though everything she had done was to try to keep herself from accepting it, she had convinced herself that he was going to die, and her brain didn't know to process all of this.

\_This isn't how it happened, \_she thought, the past colliding painfully with the present and thirteen years of trying to escape coming completely undone. The dam that broke under the weight of that sorrow was more than she could contain.

Maggie buried her face against his shoulder, grabbed him tightly, and despite her best efforts, sobbed.

The moment the first bayful sound escaped her, muffled against his flesh, Iruu jerked from sleep. He did not know what was going on but



he instinctively shifted, wrapping his arms protectively around her. Ignoring the aches that tore across unhappy muscles, completely consumed with raw anxiety at her outburst, he pulled her against his chest, letting his face drop to her hair, reassuringly speaking her name.

She trembled, crying an abundance of hot tears into the crook of his neck.

“Oh, gods, I recognized this.”

And his own brother had damned him for what he had done. That was fine, better him than—

Maggie drew a ragged breath and wept fiercely her fear, humiliation, unspeakable heartache: and the depth of such pain reached to the core of Iruu's empty existence, and it broke him.

He had never been able to help it—he didn't want to be what he was—

Iruu was left to regret many things, including the fact that Negalli had suffered at all for reaching for him in her moment of complete weakness.

It wasn't her fault. Heth had been reported dead months before. His name was already carved into the wall.

Marriages were generally political or social moves to improve standing, but Negalli had chosen Heth for more than just that: she loved him.

Sangheili women were expected to be strong, ruthless, viciously upholding the honor of their husband's households in their absence; with grace and dignity. Negalli had tried, but failed miserably.

The youngest 'Loram had returned home to the news of his brother's demise and, at Mother's insistence, gone to pay respect to the widow. He would have preferred to not. Negalli hated him. Heth hated him. Iruu was not welcome to step foot on their property, ever.

Standing on the walk in front of the home Heth and Negalli had shared, he hadn't been sure which was worse: to incur the wrath of the dead or the living.

Iruu had grievously offended Negalli's family. At the three day long celebration following the wedding ceremony he had managed to impregnate two of their servants.

They were servants, not slaves. They had been free people, sort of, so it wasn't like he had stepped across too much of a social boundary...only his brother's bride came from a House on the other side of the planet—and they had different cultural rules about some things—that thing in particular.

The women had been quite foreign and exotic: with honey brown skin; little iridescent freckles across their short, chubby mandibles; wide violet eyes; and an accent that made their words sound looped together and elegant when they spoke—

\_Gods, he had been such a derelict\_. And, apparently in their culture, a Swordsman impregnating the middle servant class effectually voided a contract of servitude.

Negalli and her family had not been happy.

Bearing in mind how their last interaction went, Iruu had approached no farther than the corner of the house. He had to keep himself from tactically peeping around it instead of stepping out into the open.

Negalli had been hanging laundry from a line in the back yard with her young daughter. The girl, almost old enough to enter childhood training and half as tall as her mother, had scampered away at Iruu's presence. Negalli had looked up to see him standing a safe distance away, for him, with his face turned to the ground. She stood holding a pillow covering, eyeing the man she had once, very loudly, called words he did not understand before smacking him hard across the snout, on the front lawn, in front of half of his clan.

"Your husband's name, honors the family wall," Iruu had said.

Heth had been away for over two years and now, he wasn't coming back. The least Iruu could do was contain what little pride he had left and offer traditional commiseration.

Negalli stood there looking at him without expression for what felt an eternity. He had simply lingered in silence, avoiding eye contact, respectfully waiting for her to give the parting response and be done with it.

She never did.

She had stepped beneath the line, walking a slow but deliberate path to him. He fully expected she would slap his face again for trespass, offer of condolences or no, and he would have accepted that. But, she stopped before him and reached to touch the collar of his garment, her tapered fingertips grazing his neck before she traced the line of his mandibles and drew his gaze to hers. As he looked up, Negalli had stepped into him and buried her face against his chest, her breath trembling.

The mournful sound that escaped her was heartbreaking.

She cried and Iruu had let her: holding her, offering absolutely no judgment for this woman making a shameful display of herself. Then, Negalli had wiped her face on his shirt, still clinging to the fabric as she looked up. She whispered through trembling mandibles, her words heavily accented despite decades living in Loram keep, "For moment, I thought you were him," she touched her muzzle to his chest, "You smell like him."

Then, she had bowed her head under the weight of untold suffering and slipped from Iruu's arms to crumple to the ground at his feet. He took a knee and collected her up. It was not appropriate to mourn so fully in a place where some member of the public might happen by and see.

Even if she hated him, had embarrassed him before members of his family, Iruu couldn't leave her to such shame.

It was never his intentionâ€|but, it never had been in those situationsâ€|he had long accepted he was a weak man in the presence of a damaged woman.

And, Negalli had all but begged him to stay, just for a few hours, and he was not prepared to refuse. She wanted to pretend he was a man she loved and that was a delusion his own loneliness and personal regret would not let him deny her...or himself.

Two months later, Negalli's belly had been swollen and round when Heth had come home.

It had been a clerical error. Heth's name had been recorded on the wrong ship's manifest and the small fleet had been sabotaged by a backbiting group of Kig-Yar before the matter was officially rectified. Chain of command knew where he was, but the vessel to which he was recorded, but not present, had been destroyed in the attempted internal hijacking. Communication systems throughout the fleet had been lost and not fully restored until long after Negalli had received the notice of death.

Heth had no way of knowing who the child Negalli bore belonged to. It was none of his business. The boy was his wife's offspring, that was all he needed to know, and he would raise the child as his own as was customary. It was probably not until he came home at the end of the Great War and found that the executioners had come for Negalli that Heth ever had any idea the son he loved and buried was Iruu's.

It was far better that Heth think his brother had perverted his noble right than to know how weak and disgraceful his wife had been.

Iruu knew Maggie's tears to be a confession of how afraid she had been...and the idea that she would have mourned him was difficult to accept.

Swordsmen were not mourned when they died.

"Iâ€|. Whittaker sniffed, wiping at her face with the heel of her palm, "I'm sorry."

Iruu shook his head, bunting his muzzle against her cheek, finding himself unable to speak as he pushed up to sit and held her against him.

She felt so stupid. Maggie's eyes burned, she couldn't stop crying, and she couldn't bring herself to look at him. Waking to feel his warmth, hear his breathing, to know he was alive, had been like coming-to from the emotional coma she had been stuck in. And, when he reached for her, everything she had tried to control, held back by drowning it in the bottom of a bottle, in shallow moments of relief, spiraled free and she was helpless to stop it.

Now, having made a fool of herself, what she wanted to say and what she felt she needed to explain were so small in comparison to the knowledge that he would live.

It would sound dumb and selfish.

As she tried to get herself composed, Whittaker suddenly felt

vulnerable in a way she had never intended to allow another person to see, more broken than the moment she opened the last comm from home and her life fell completely to pieces.

She had been on a shipboard duty assignment and just completed a twenty-four hour rotation with Jeremiah Gable: a disgusting pig who seemed to think he was God's gift to all things female. Just her type. Maggie had already developed an unsavory reputation in her unit and Gable seemed to take it as his personal mission to crawl into her pants. Unfortunately for him, no one had clued him in to the fact that alcohol was a \_requirement\_ not a suggestion, otherwise he probably would have been successful long before the duty assignment from hell that would never end.

It had been twenty-four hours of rebuffing a determined, self-assured, decently attractive Marine and all Maggie had wanted to do was grab some chow, shower, crawl into her bunk, and pretend she \_wasn't\_ the unit whore.

\_Every unit has one.\_

She stopped by the mess and grabbed a box of assorted food before tucking away in the room she shared with another female Lance Corporal, Shelby Cartwright. Fortunately, Cartwright was long gone to her assigned station and would not be bothering Maggie. Shelby was as decent a suitemate as they could come: clean, quiet, didn't listen to vids or comm at all hours of the night; didn't sneak guys in the room. The two got along just fine, although Cartwright did make it a point to invite her wayward roomy to chapel at every opportunity. It was kind of sweet, in a Catholic-guilt-indicting sort of way.

Whittaker had showered and was sitting on her bunk picking at her food in silence when there was an authoritative knock at the door. It was just after 0900 hours and Maggie had been startled, mostly because she could hear the \_'oh shits'\_ and the closing of doors all down the hall before she peered from the peep-hole to see her unit Commander's tall lanky frame blocking the view.

\_Oh shit was right\_, she had thought, trying in those few seconds to remember if she had done anything, or anyone, recently to get her in trouble.

She had opened the door with her most serious expression and begun to say 'Sir,' but the word had died on her lips. Standing next to Commander Flaxman was the unit Chaplain, Captain Hughes. Time seemed to stop as her brain refused to accept the reality of the situation. Maggie knew what this meant, the two of them standing there together, Flaxman's generally angry face looking somber, and Hughes wearing his most compassionate expression.

\_But, that was just in the movies, this wasn't \_really\_ \_how they did these things, right?\_

"Magdalene Whittaker," Flaxman had said.

She couldn't breathe; she barely registered the use of her actual first name. Eyes peered from cracked doorways along the opposite side of the hall as dead silence rang too loud. A junior enlisted member turned down the hall then did an immediate about face upon seeing the

Commander and disappeared hastily back around the corner, his hushed \_'don't go that way' \_echoing back.

Maggie looked up at Flaxman and did something close to a nod, turning to the Chaplain and feeling the weight of his presence like a ten ton hammer.

The Commander cleared his throat softly, looking authoritative and apologetic all at once, \_he knew she knew what was coming,\_ "I'm here to notify youâ€|"

She felt sick, dizzy, like her brain had stopped working at normal speed, \_No, this isn't happening. \_Sensation seemed to sink from her body like water down a drain.

"â€|your home planet was attacked by the Covenant; it was a complete loss."

Even at those words she didn't comprehend and her mind tried to come up with an alternative outcome.

"The members of your familyâ€|"

Everything completely stopped in that microsecond, and a million possibilities screamed through her mind, every end result but the one she could not let herself believe he was about to say: \_they were evacuated to some remote hellhole, are in a homeless camp, they were injured,\_ \_they hate you and don't want us to tell you where they are, anything, please, say anything butâ€|\_

"â€|were all killed."

And there it was, the statement that couldn't be taken back: the words that completely severed one part of her life from the rest.

Her eyes sank down his crisp uniform to the reflective surface of his boots. There were scuffs on the floor, and a gum wrapper was wedged in a crack in the threshold.

"I'm sorry, Whittaker," Flaxman said, sounding like he was far away. She felt too much to feel, like everything inside had been hollowed out. Maggie looked back up, from the Commander to the Chaplain, "Captain Hughes is on duty," the other man nodded sympathetically, "We'll give you a few moments to get squared away, he will be here, you are to go with him to his office, understood?"

Maggie managed a \_'yes, Sir' \_before Flaxman reached to close the door.

When she emerged, in something more suitable than pj pants and a tank top, it had just been Hughes, hat in hand, to walk her to his office.

He was an okay guy as Chaplains went, but Whittaker didn't feel present when she talked to him. He wasn't pushy about God and religion, he had simply sat there with her and asked questions which she supposed were to give some indication of her emotional state. A Sergeant from Mental Health Services had stopped by and that's when it got unreal, distant, like she wasn't connected to her own brain

and was instead watching and listening from a corner of the room.

Cartwright had come to escort her back to their quarters; Whittaker would spend seventy-two hours on bereavement suspension of duty under mandatory suicide watch. She would be lucky to get to pee with the head door closed for the next three days.

All she wanted to do was go to bed. She didn't have it in her to get drunk and find someone to fuck, not that Cartwright would have let anyone near her. Whittaker threw her forgotten food in the trash and crawled into her bunk as Shelby settled herself at her desk cubby.

Maggie didn't even have it in her to cry, it wasn't real. It was happening to someone else.

She didn't know how long she had laid there, bundled beneath the blankets with just her head poking out, staring at the wall, when there was a chime from her data pad. Running purely on reflex, Maggie had reached for the device and tapped at its surface to see a comm message icon. She clicked it, and the bottom of what was left of her world fell out.

On the screen was a familiar round face, with chubby cheeks and a dimpled chin; mocha skin accentuated with black, silky curls and sapphire eyes.

\_Shannaâ€|\_

\_See, she's alive, it isn't real.\_

The child had been too close to the image recorder, her pixie nose looking out of proportion until Maggie's mom had pulled her back.

"Ooh-bye, mommy," Shanna had babbled.

Evelyn Shaw-Whittaker's infectious laugh spilled from the tiny speaker and seemed to fill the entire room, "No, no, it's 'Hello, mommy'," she corrected.

Shanna had squealed and giggled, lunging for the recording device just in time to be tugged back, "E'loooo, mommy!" she cried, prompting more laughter from Maggie's mom.

Settling the toddler in her lap, Evelyn had readjusted the recorder, "\_Someone\_ wanted to send a comm before bedtimeâ€|"

"Shanna do it!" the girl squealed.

"Yes, yes you did, princess," Evelyn gave the child's forehead a sideways smooch, "It's about eight-forty-five pm here, Sunday. When you drop out of slip comm me back, your brother wants toâ€|" the transmission went blurry, the image skewing for a second as if split in half before synching back up with itself. Shanna poked out her bottom lip and pulled at her grandmother's collar as Evelyn muttered in annoyance at the comm recorder, not realizing the device was working fine, "Martin," she yelled, twisting to holler out the opened door behind her, "Martin, what was thatâ€|"

There was a muffled response from what Maggie knew to be down the hall from her father's home office. The lights flickered in the background. Shanna squealed in fright.

Whittaker's mother turned back around and tucked a strand of graying blonde hair behind her ear, "I'm not sure if you're getting this on your end, sweetie, but we've got some weird interference here. I love you, talk to you soon," Evelyn bobbed Shanna in her arm and pointed to the screen, but Shanna had just buried her face in her grandmother's shoulder before the transmission winked out.

Shelby sat in the floor rubbing Maggie's back as she bawled and wretched into the toilet. Whittaker's roommate had cried right along with her. They both knew what had happened.

Even after she was able to get herself together and decided to go, escorted, down the hall to the laundry, there had been no escape from the looks in people's eyes: those distant expressions of pity and self-preserving detachment. That was if they didn't turn away altogether, as if thinking that by looking at her the same might happen to them.

After that experience, Whittaker pretty much stopped eating, didn't get out of bed, and when the suicide watch ended, she fell into a mire of self-hatred and endless, unfulfilling attempts to maintain denial: never stopping to really grieve, not wanting to admit it was her reality.

She never deleted the comm. For the next thirteen years she would use it to torment herself, even though all forty-nine seconds were forever seared into her memory.

She drown herself in booze, sex, the war, eventually made Sergeant, and put in for Spec Ops. The physical torment of her professional and personal lives became how she lived with herself, hoping to just die; lying to herself by pretending that when the next mission was over she would take leave and go home and everything would be as it was—unable to accept that there was no going back, they were all dead, and all the things she had left unsaid and undone would forever be that way.

Maggie squirmed in Iruu's arms, grabbing his face and pressing her forehead to his snout. She tried to speak but her words came out in a rush, "I've done a lot of terrible things and I used you."

His hands fell to her waist as he pushed her back to look her in the eyes.

"I was a disappointment to my family, and I killed my daughter...it was all my fault because I left her behind," tears fell in streams across her cheeks, "I've let men do really bad things to me—I want them to—" her body slacked in his hands and his eyes darted across her face as he saw her panic, driving words from her mouth in whatever disheveled order they happened.

She hung her head, tears dripping onto his chest, "I just want—to go home, to go back—to not be this person—but, I wanted someone to—" she sighed, lifting her misery stained face to see him wide-eyed and searching. She sniffed. "Then, you were nice to me—"

Maggie reached with a trembling hand to the edge of the wound in his chest, "I thought you were gonna die and I probably shouldn't have butâ€|"

Iruu pulled her close and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Her lips trembled against his skin, "I'm so sorryâ€|.I justâ€|wanted you to \_stay\_," she whispered, and the word tore his hearts open.

"Because Iâ€|" Maggie drew a ragged breath and he felt her kiss his neck, her face wet from crying. Iruu's pulse lighted with conflicting emotions as she patted her lips gently up his flesh, every movement a plea. He groaned despite himself as he felt the soft texture of her open mouth along his jaw.

That was all he could take.

Tangling his fingers in her hair 'Loram twisted his face away from her. It was physically painful. He drew a deep breath, gritting his teeth as he looked to see her, eyes closed, neck arched back against his hand in her hair: openly submissive.

He knew that look as well, the look of a woman who had been so hurt she was reduced to docility; expecting, wanting, believing she \_needed \_to be damaged further.

\_Oh, gods damn it, why did he have to be so knowledgeable about such thingsâ€|\_

Because he had always been miserably deluded: a Swordsman, which he would have given up; an assassin and a Sovereign, things he had no choice but to be; a noble who had taken infinite opportunities to be dutiful to his lineageâ€|who, in the end, had a disgraceful preference for damaged women: women who would be receptive to, and not repulsed by, the fact that he was incapable of being cruel.

'\_Men hurt meâ€|that's the way it worksâ€|'\_

Iruu felt ill at the very thought, "No," he said angrily. Maggie whimpered, biting down on her bottom lip as he tilted her face to him and pushed his forehead against hers, waiting until she opened her eyes. He had never threatened a woman in his life, it was not agreeable, but the words he spoke carried just that implication, "I \_will \_\_\*\*not\*\*\_hurt you."

## 20. Chapter 20

**\*\*Warning: \*\*Lemon**

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Twenty<p>

**\*\*21 October 2563**

>Classified SlipSpace Projection<br>Between Beta Centauri and Sol Systems

><strong>\_\*\*UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\*\*\_\_\*\*



><strong>\_\*\*0500 Zulu\*\*

The assault harness was hopelessly damaged. What would have crossed Iruu's right chest was almost nonexistent; the center connection was severed and tattered wires poked from shattered edges. Giant chunks of exoskeletal plating were missing to reveal an inner lining of assorted shield supports.

'Loram sat at the desk in his small human quarters tearing down what remained of the piece of armor. He had inverted and arranged his badly torn bodysuit on the floor near his feet and was dropping each component atop it as he went about methodical disassembly. The rest of his armor had responded to systems checks and had been thoroughly cleaned and divided into stacks according to what was left to be done to them. Most were polished and required no additional attention while a few sat atop the desk needing dents pulled and scratches addressed.

Finishing his task, Iruu mindlessly tossed the last of the assault harness in and gathered the arms and legs of the bodysuit, folding them over and tying them together: everything which would need replacing in a neat bundle. This was a task he had undertaken countless times, though admittedly not in recent memory, especially with equipment this badly damaged.

Even though every now and then tissue would sting and muscle would twitch, he could only lay around for so long.

It was not like Iruu to be idle. Though he had not been completely so, he did recognize, at this date and time, he had been pretty much that for the better part of an entire day. Much as he would have preferred to stay in bed with Maggie, they were, at some point in the near future, going to arrive back at Earth and he would have to be something close to presentable when the transport arrived. She, however, seemed to have no such concerns and appeared quite content to continue lying, naked, in his bed.

'Loram smiled, a tingle coursing through him at the very thought.

For once, it had been a pleasant experience to realize he had greatly underestimated something: that something being the depth of Maggie's physical need. Not that that was an issue, in the least, it had simply been unexpected for her to wish to stay. Her confession of preferences aside, Iruu had never been the type to hurt a female. Not knowing how a human woman would respond to that, he had intended to give her the option to escape knowing he would take matters no farther in the direction to which she was accustomed.

He had found himself at a similar impasse many times: fully willing to let women leave, not that any of them had. Swordsmen were notorious sadists and he had been guilty by association. Iruu could never be sure how many women stayed because they truly wished to, how many had done so out of cultural obligation or worse: because they had been afraid.

It was a decision Maggie had never made with a sober mind. In that moment, though Iruu could not know her motivation, he was not going to make the decision for her, and he had very much meant what he said as a threat.

However, as soon as the words had left his mouth, the tiniest of smiles had flickered across her face. He sat watching her eyes and felt her hands begin to creep up his chest and her fingers nervously play along his neck before she brushed his cheek. She had closed her eyes and begun tentatively kissing his snout, running her lips along an upper mandible to his ear bud, "Sat it again," she whispered, her voice full of fearful longing.

Understanding had raced through him and he tucked his chin, allowing himself to lick the crook of her neck, "I will not hurt you," he murmured into her delicate skin. He was unsure whether it was the words or actions that coaxed the low, tortured moan from her, but it was gratifying just the same. All concern over bodily injury came to a complete stop. He had not been in a place to care from that moment forward.

Each time she had been more assertive than the last, less timid, and more vocal about her desires. Iruu had found it delightful to turn over and over to the same mate. There was much innate satisfaction in hearing the rising timbre of her cries met by the gentle shutter of her body's fulfillment as there was in the way she had reached for him in the subsequent hours again and again.

Iruu cursed, shifting against his body's reaction to these recollections. He ground his mandibles and drummed his fingers against the desktop before lifting a tool and laying claim to focus for the task at hand.

Maggie watched him fidget for a few seconds before resuming his work. Beneath a warm tangle of blankets smelling of sandalwood, lilac, tar, and sweat, she gave a catlike stretch, her feet poking out to dangle over the edge of the mattress. She had woken to find herself laying crossways in the middle of the bed and had stayed there enjoying the warmth, sore in places she wasn't even sure belonged to her, head peeping from the blankets to see Iruu at the desk. Quietly watching him for a long while, she wasn't willing to give in to the need to get up and be productive. Leaving the bed to attend to bathroom necessities had seemed grueling enough, not to mention leaving the room to take her uniforms to the ship's laundry and get something to eat.

Have I really been here that long?

Whittaker couldn't remember getting so much sleep or feeling so starving, for everything, as if all of her sense were suddenly awake and on fire. A cold tickle of self-consciousness crept up her spine and Maggie scrunched back under the blankets. This was new territory in more ways than one and a part of her couldn't help but be unsettled.

Staying in a lover's bed beyond the sexual act wasn't something she had ever done. That was assuming, of course, they even made it to a bed. Whittaker had always orchestrated past experiences so as not to really have to deal with leaving or being kicked out.

She had been vastly unaware of just how much alcohol dulled everything. Sex had always been enjoyable, just in a mind numbing, self-destructive, slow attempt at emotional suicide kind of way. But, Iruu had clearly not been interested in any of that.

Sure, she had heard the warning in his tone when he said he wouldn't hurt her, but her mistake was not hearing it as truth. In that moment, she hadn't bolted for the door because in the darkest part of her soul she didn't \_believe \_him. So, she did what she always did, she provoked him.

And, then, he had made her pay for her unbelief.

What began as a self-destructive plea had turned into psychological torment. The next time he said those words the timbre of his voice had changed from threatening to the heavy, forbearing tone of a promise so much greater than whatever he had in mind for the immediate future.

She didn't have the luxury of alcohol to blame for what she had heard, or the ability to close off what she felt. The most painful part had been the way he made her feel completely vulnerable, stripped of every defense she once had, as if she were naked long before she actually had been. The lights in the room never rose above muted dawn, but there was little comfort in that and absolutely no way to hide. He could see every expression and spend as much time as he wanted in exploration.

It had eventually occurred to Maggie that she should have been at least a little scared for reasons other than the obvious. 'Loram's life had been devoted as a civilian and as a warrior to infiltrating unknown territory and asserting his presence as if he had every right to be there and do whatever the hell he wanted. Iruu had no need to be overly assertive in order to be imposing and a mixture of fear that he was lying or that perhaps he \_wasn't\_ had given rise to a level of physical and emotional alarm Whittaker hadn't felt inâ€|well, ever in \_that\_ kind of situation.

He had taken his time, savoring, learning, memorizing the map of body. He made her feel awkward, and flustered, as she tried to rush and he wouldn't cooperate. At one point, when she was attempting familiarization of her own, he had growled irritably and pinned both of her hands with one of his to the bed above her head, leaving her completely in the open and at his mercy. Which, he had promptly taken advantage of. Not in any hurry, Iruu had removed her clothing one fragment at a time and proceeded to tactically discover practically every inch of her, learning all the ways and places to touch that made her breath catch...

Slowly, Maggie had realized he was doing it on purpose.

All the time taken to acquaint himself with her body; the fading bruises on her shoulder and foot, a scar here, a freckle there, the birthmark on the shell of her right hip, abjectly refusing to even kiss her until he was finished with his appraisal, had been for one purpose: to make her completely lose her mind.

\_And, son of a bitch...\_

There was no telling how long it took for him to do it. She was stubborn but he was persistent. Iruu had seemed unconcerned with such a trivial thing as \_time \_as he reduced her from shy, uncertain, and wholly self-conscious to a mentally broken puddle of fevered mush, absolutely willing to give voice to every lewd thought that raced

through her mind. Nerves that had never been so deliberately awakened and ignored had felt overloaded and, when she was at the point of feeling as if she would die if he didn't give her the satisfaction of at least one overtly sexual touch \_that's\_ when he had kissed her.

Strange, a little clumsy at first, with the sandy texture of his tongue gently probing between her lips, asking, not demanding as his strong, masculine taste infiltrated her mouth. She had wiggled against her hands pinned, once again, as he had let his free hand drift ever further down her body at an easy pace causing too many desires to vie for attention. Then, with her mouth full of him, he had proceeded to slowly explore further; the rough texture of his hand unhurried as he overtook the most sensitive part of her. It made no sense that he could be so gentle, so attuned and attentive, so generously...mean.

He enticed her repeatedly to the pinnacle and denied her over and over again, seeming to know when the slightest of movements would have been too much...or just enough. At one point Maggie remembered trembling, writhing, moaning helplessly into him, doing everything she could to get relief as his long fingers teased. His own arousal had burned hard and hot as it pressed against her leg and she remembered feeling as if she couldn't take it anymore. Tearing her mouth away from him, folding under the weight of oppressive seduction, she had found herself audibly pleading with him, in fairly explicit terms.

Apparently, that's \_exactly\_ what he had wanted and Whittaker thought she had a pretty good idea of what it was like to be skinned alive.

Then, Iruu had shifted gears and ceased being an unyielding, dominant force. Her body had screamed, no, she had screamed, when he had withdrawn his delicate, persuasive touch and sank to the mattress and pulled her along on top of him. Through a blur of consuming urgency, distressed, frantically seeking, Maggie had been surprised that he was capable of such open passivity. Though she soon realized the change in power dynamic was \_also\_ on purpose. No matter how wound up and confused she felt at the time, that level of submission was something she had found herself grateful for.

As she sat astride his stomach, leaning forward to nip and kiss at his chest, her hands had instinctively slid along his flesh passing between the two of them as he grumbled and shifted needily. She smiled a bit when her fingers crossed the plain of his pelvis and he bit down on his mandibles to ineffectively contain a moan of anticipation.

The hiss that escaped him had turned in to a longing groan as she tried to take hold of him and a covetous \_oh, shit\_ had trembled from her lips as she ran her hand along his full, considerable length, unable to close her hand around his hard width.

Slipping from the bed, Maggie hugged the blanket, pulling it in a puddle behind as she walked the few steps to where Iruu was hunkered over the small desk. His focus was decidedly split between looking down at the bit of armor in his hand and appraising her from the corner of his eye as she approached.

His scent and the smell of various polishes and chemicals filed Maggie's nose as she leaned forward and began kissing a line up his neck, lingering to pay special attention to scars. An appreciative purring sound rumbled from him as he canted his head to one side and diverted his attention to soaking up hers. The deep, arhythmic noise he made low in his chest was met with a soft, approving hum as Maggie slipped her arms across Iruu's shoulders. Standing on her tiptoes, she leaned into him as the blanket slipped from around her.

For a few moments, 'Loram let himself enjoy the feeling of her bare skin against his back. In the time they had kept one another's company there had evolved an openness which was not strictly anticipated. It wasn't just the sex. They had recognized how shouldering guilt had altered their lives; two people caught up in, and comforted by, someone as broken as they each felt.

There was refuge to be found in someone who could not understand why the other's sins would have been unforgivable. He knew Maggie hated feeling like she first betrayed her family then let them down on some moral level, that she hated to admit she had once deeply regretted her decision to become a warrior, she hated the mistakes she felt she made because of loneliness and how she could never bring herself to love her daughter the way she thought she should have. Then, everything she once thought she hated was thrown in her face and there was no going back.

In return, Maggie knew more about him than any other person, living or dead, ever had. There was no judgment. She knew, in his youth, Iruu had tried to relinquish his nobility and in so doing had willfully signed his own death sentence; that he had believed he would have preferred death over being alone.

The Sudin High Council would not try him for murder because the details would have become part of public record. Hakkamr would have been cast in a poor light for failing to eliminate one of their own criminals: that was not something done to a State intended to be retained as an ally. Instead of casting aspersions, or accepting Iruu's withdrawal and executing him for cowardice, the Council had decided to let nature take its course, let him die in their service. Only, it did not turn out that way.

'Loram readily confessed, despite his martial ability, he was too young to have been an assassin, let alone a Sovereign. Full of rage and hate and with little to stop him, Iruu had proceeded to abuse his station: seeking the Council's wrath. He had killed and maimed on command and at his leisure. He had lived hoping the Council would order done what he hadn't the pride to do himself. Beyond devastated by his inability to escape and ashamed that he could not muster the honor to end it, Iruu became a monster even the Council was afraid to provoke. Miserably, of those set beneath him, other assassins and men many times his age, none of them would draw a blade against him.

Then, he had joined the Covenant and still could not manage to bring himself to die.

The acceptance he got from Maggie at all of that was crippling. She did not appear to see him as shameful and she seemed to understand that what he said was not in boast. All she had really wanted to know was how the Council of Sudin ever found out he killed the man from

Hakkamr. The fact she understood that \_that \_was one of the points which had directed the course of his life meant more to him than she could have known.

Curled atop the bed in an uncovered tangle of arms and legs, still sweaty and in no apparent rush to get up, he held her against his chest as they talked for what felt forever, "My brother told them," he answered.

She had looked back at him with wide eyes.

Iruu shrugged, "When he came to grudgingly invite me to his wedding ceremony I was quite intoxicated and extremelyâ€|\_jealous\_. What began as an honest attempt to express congratulations turned into a confession."

"Why would he do that?"

"I am certain he was trying to protect his bride, from me," he clicked his mandibles, "I was not stable, even then, and I gave him a convenient way to get rid of me. Knowing myself as I do, I do not blame him: I would have done the same."

There had been silence for a while after that. There were no words to express the solace being with her in such open moments invoked. He attempted to follow the rhythm of her breathing with his own, anticipating the kind of peace which would lull them into a cycle of restful sleep before waking again to...

Then Maggie had quivered and rolled over in his arms, wiping at a tear that streaked down one cheek as she brushed her nose against his snout, "You loved Gia, didn't you," it had not been an inquiry. Again, her perception had been painfully accurate: she recognized his decent into madness had begun with \_that\_ heartache.

"At the time, \_I believed I did\_."

She had buried her face against his chest and said, barely above a whisper, "I'm not her."

The words had cut him more deeply than he could have anticipated. Protective male instincts had flared and he saw red, enraged that Maggie was so wounded she had begun strategizing a way to prepare for the scalding pain of his rejection. He wanted to find every man who had added to that kind of hurt and rip open their guts for using and cultivating such feelings of unworth. Above all else, it made him furious to realize he had perhaps added to that, to know she could think during the course of their repeated lovemaking his mind was occupied with thoughts of \_Gia\_.

He had snorted like an angry bull, detangling himself to crawl across her and stand from the bed. She had watched, sitting up and pulling a sheet over her body, probably a little frightened, as he stepped to the dresser and sharply jerked open the top drawer. He retrieved the unfinished stone figure and looked it over before turning back to her and tossing it onto the bed, "\_That\_," he said sternly, doing his best to contain his emotions, "is \_all\_ that remains of \_Gia\_: a face carved in stone based on a memory more than a hundred years old."

Maggie had picked up the figure to run her fingers along unfinished lines.

"All that I did," he clenched his mandibles, "and all that I\_ became\_ is because of \_that\_ failure. I could not save her or cover her shame and I did not want to accept that she \_never\_ loved me," Whittaker had looked up at him, her face conveying surprise at such a declaration, "I made choices I would not have otherwise in order to escape what all of that made \_me\_ feel," he had twisted to sit on the edge of the bed, head bowed, and grumbled, "and the selfishness I wrought for so long cost many innocent people their lives."

He had remained there in silence for a few moments, rolling the thought over and over in his head. \_No\_, holding on to \_that\_ regret would not cost him again; faith to her memory be damned, he would \_not\_ allow Gia to hurt Maggie.

Iruu had turned and plucked the incomplete carving from her grasp, curling his fingers around it, crushing it in his hand before dropping the pieces on the floor, "I have \_never\_ \_been\_ under the delusion you are her," and before he could stop himself, "Maggie, I am \_yours\_."

"Hey," she whispered, "where are you?" Whittaker pressed her lips to Iruu's neck and he came back from that moment of heart wrenching disclosure; which, painfully, she had not appeared to understand.

'Loram sighed, setting down the armor and tool before walking his legs around. As he turned the chair from the desk to face her, Maggie could see the sadness in his eyes. He was still lost somewhere in the depth of pain she couldn't even begin to measure.

\_He didn't do anything wrong. \_

At least she had the luxury of pointing to the moments in her life when she fucked it all up. Like, when she had decided to go to that damn party, and getting so plastered that she couldn't remember what had happened, getting fucked by God-only-knew who: those moments, right there, she had made bad decisions. Not requesting reassignment, signing those damn custody papers, getting up at fifteen 'til the ass crack of dawn and leaving without a word, rarely returning comms, not going home on leave: again, right there, those were her mistakes.

Even if he felt he sucked at being a person, by the measure of his own society Iruu had done practically everything \_right\_. He had loved a woman enough to kill to defend her honor, he had become a Swordsman, acquired a noble title, joined the Covenant, and had a lot of kids with a lot of women. He didn't always like who he was, but who did? At least he had logical reasons for the 'mistakes' he made.

And, even \_that\_ had been reduced to nothing. It was difficult to hear, not just because she began to understand why he could never go home, but because he never \_wanted\_ to be what he was, even when his society told him he should have. Then, he had been degraded to the point that even his religion was stripped away under the force of cultural norms. Instead of seeking guidance from the honored dead of his maternal clan, Iruu honestly felt he could only make petition to

the denigrated members of his bloodline.

She had asked and he had gone through them, climbing from the bed to collect the figures from the dresser before lying back down and propping them on his chest.

The Precidict Edu'ri 'Varlem, carved from black volcanic glass, had committed the original sin of all traditional Sangheili faiths. He had touched a Forerunner artifact and lore dictated that upon doing so he was imparted with immense wisdom at the cost of burns so severe they eventually killed him. It took him more than a week to die and during that time he prophesied that one day a child of the Reclaimers, the sacred Key, would come and unlock the artifact that sat at the center of their worship. His words were the foundation of the religion of Iruu's ancestors, every utterance recorded as holy canon, every word blasphemy.

Then there was the Master Zakee 'Varlem, carved from blue granite. The first high priest of what Iruu called the Sons of Damnation. Zakee refused to pay superficial homage to the Covenant and was vocally against the Writ of Union. He was put to death, but not before he saw the Forerunner artifact hidden so the San'Shyuum could never have it. For this, the whole religion was declared corrupt and forced underground. And, for his willful defiance, Zakee was publically executed by dismemberment.

Srina 'Loram, Iruu's mother: carved from brown chert. He said that in his youth he mistook her fear for favoritism. Presented with the Order of Judgment, Iruu learned that members of his father's House were keepers of the forbidden faith, protectors of the still hidden artifact. Srina had been raised, and had reared her older children, with the religion as nothing more than a threatening folk tale, the kind of story told to keep young in line. Through obligatory record keeping following conception of Iruu, she would have faced the truth. She had to have been terrified. Her youngest son could have been taken away; selected to become one of the warrior monks; removed by force before the end of his first year never to be seen again. Srina could not have refused a Swordsman; but for her part in furthering the Varlem line she was executed.

Finally, carved from gray limestone, there was Xan 'Varlem: son of Iruu's father. He had actually been one of the warrior monks, and it was because of Xan's actions that an entire bloodline was condemned with Preclusion. He killed all but two inhabitants of the mountain temple, desecrated the artifact, stole the sacred Key, hijacked a Covenant ship, and fled to a desert planet. The artifact was never recovered and the bones of Xan and the Key were found in the dunes near the crashed vessel. The House of Varlem tried to contain the damage, tried to address the many legal, moral, and religious infractions, but the matter was overtaken by the State, the Continental, the Planetary, and eventually, the Covenant High Council.

Maggie had watched Iruu's face for a moment as he chewed at his mandibles, "The Key was a woman," she finally said.

He nodded without looking at her, "The High Council of Sanghelios declared Xan a heretic of the highest caliber because the only living holy man confessed that the Key had been a human woman: just as Edu'ri said she would be. I am told when the Covenant High Council



was notified, the San'Shyuum practically went mad. It went against all of \_their\_ teachings, especially in light of the destruction of the Halo. They couldn't agree to the High Council of Sanghelios' decree that the Varlem lineage be wiped from existence fast enough."

And there it was. The only thing Iruu had done wrong was having a lawless brother he never even knew existed until it was all done and over. How in the fuck was that considered justice?

Iruu bumped Maggie's lips gently with his, running his hands up her thighs and across her rear to settle at the small of her back, making a soft keening sound, "I am right here," he murmured. Maggie smiled, playing her fingers across raised scars that dotted his collar.

There was very little of him that didn't bear even the smallest of marks. For a moment, she studied the odd pocks that devoted the hide on his shoulder and fell in a sheet down his left arm; allowing herself the indulgence of the sight of him: all thick muscle and battle scars.

Whittaker ran her hand back along the ridge of his collarbone, down the center line of his chest, and fluttered her fingers across the middle of his stomach as she stared boldly into his eyes. He twitched and grunted a laugh. She could see a coy, reflexive smile pulling at his mandibles as he reached to catch her hand and pulled it back to his chest.

The fact that a Sangheili's body, a machine so clearly carved for and by war, could succumb to something as banal as ticklishness was infinitely entertaining.

"Seriously?" she asked dryly.

He cocked his brow ridges, one side of his face lifting into a characteristic lop-sided grin, "Silence, \_woman\_," he whispered, skimming her lips with his tongue.

The degree to which they had come to know each other had only made everything that much more intense. There were many things that went unsaid because they were mutually understood, and the things that weren't spoken only highlighted all the rest.

Iruu didn't at all understand why Maggie's dad had been so angry that she had gotten pregnant; and he had been even more baffled that John Martin Sr. had distanced himself socially from his grandchild simply because the girl had been biracial. The Sangheili flat out considered a preference for biological homogeny odd.

"My dad was a bigoted, ass-hole," Maggie had said.

They had been lying sprawled across the bed staring up at the ceiling, both taking no mind to their mutual nakedness. Iruu had curled his neck to look down at her, his face knitted in consternation, "He had no appreciation for the advantages for genetic diversity?"

Then, flopping back down and scratching at the creeping new scales across his chest, "Humans have such odd breeding preferences," he had

said to himself.

She snorted a laugh, "Wowâ€¦| '\_breeding preferences'\_â€¦|" shaking her head, "No, he didn't appreciate that at all. He was more than happy to tell everyone Shanna was adopted. Technically true and a whole lot easier than admitting his daughter had gotten knocked up and didn't have a clue who the father was. My dad got to look like an angel in the media for taking in an \_orphan\_, and mom went along with it, but dad was still pissed because he wanted \_me\_ to live with my mistake."

That had really confused him, "He regarded the offspring of his progeny as a \_mistake\_?"

The degree of acceptance left Maggie struggling to acknowledge the soul crushing fact that this was reaching a predictable end. It couldn't last. They each had lives to go back to, reality to faceâ€¦|

Whittaker felt his hand cup her chin and only then realized she had dropped her gaze. The pads of Iruu's thumbs ran along her cheeks soothingly as she looked up to see him looking back with a guileless, questioning expression.

The smile Maggie forced felt as weak as it looked and 'Loram narrowed his eyes in response. His pupils constricted to tiny slits as he issued a low, dangerous growl. Part of her felt like he was reading her mind and she pulled her chin from his grasp, looking away to gnaw at her bottom lip.

\_This was the part that was going to hurt, no matter his intentions.\_

"I should go," she somehow managed to say. Her voice was so low she didn't really hear the words and she made no further move to pull away from him.

From the corner of her eye, Maggie saw him clench his mandibles.

She was a reflection of his loss and regret, in ways she could likely not appreciate. But, the term of his usefulness was coming to a close and he was left to recognize his life for what it was. Though part of him had already cursed whatever consequences the past day would bring, Iruu was not yet ready to face that this affair had reached the point at which she would be finished with him.

'Loram slowly wagged his head as a wave of possessiveness welled up absent of his control, "No," he said in a tone suggesting his answer was not negotiable.

What little resolve Maggie had broke just that easily. The darkened cloud of emotion in his voice seeped into every part of her that yearned to be genuinely wanted. She reached for him, letting her fingertips run along the curve of his temple down to his upper jaw. He rattled an abbreviated purr and closed his eyes, turning into her touch to purse his mandibles and kiss her palm. Goosebumps broke out across her skin and icy tendrils reached from the surface down to her core as he made his way from her hand across her arm until he could easily let his lips touch her neck. A tiny mournful sound involuntarily escaped her as he tenderly nuzzled and worked his warm

hands back down across her hips.

Iruu felt the gentle drum of a tear as it fell against his face and he wrapped his arms around her, tipping his snout to wash the salty-sweetness as it silently fell unabated.

Maggie did her best to rein the sadness in, holding onto him as if her life depended on it. She had never imagined it would be so hard to stuff her emotions back in that dark pit where they had been for so long, and let him go. Maybe, she just didn't want to do either.

Iruu's hearts skipped forward as she turned slightly and caught his mouth with hers. What had at first been a perplexingly awkward act for anatomically incompatible mouths had become a mutually understood and satisfying expression that was likely more enjoyable to experience than it ever would be to witness. Her tongue was velvety as it slid against his as if searching.

Maggie's hands began to wander his exposed skin and Iruu worked himself to the edge of the chair, crumpling to his knees before her. Any thought of making it the few feet to the bed came undone as desires rose sharply into demands. Clinging to her waist, he twisted and dragged her along in a tangle of limbs and expectantly seeking mouth parts. Staggering around, she stood before him as he sat on the floor.

A forceful kiss lingered before Iruu broke away and began running his mouth along her jaw, her neck, trailing down the midline of her body, thrumming a rancorous, eager purr against her naked flesh. She was soft, every part of her decidedly feminine. Even the parts which were at first unfamiliar blended with the known to exude the wonderful testament of her gender. From the delicate set of her shoulders and chest, the dainty curve of her waist that flared out to womanly hips, the carved yet supple muscle of her thighs; to her human mouth, her small human breasts, and her short human legs, it all left Iruu drowning in base, male desire.

Maggie tensed in his grasp as he manipulated her into a suitable position and tease his lips suggestively along the rim of her naval. She dug her nails into his shoulders and arched against his grip. Her knees began to tremble as he made his way ever slowly downward, searching with a rough tongue slicked with saliva.

His own need increased at the scent of her, the way she smelled of soaps and sweat, the aroma of woman and...him. Never had he know what it was to have a female who did not smell of another man or other men. Never had he any idea how the absence of such combined with his own scent signature could give rise to the kind of territorial feelings which threatened to overtake him.

Iruu felt fire push through his veins when he found her intimate valley and she threw her head back, making empty, breathless petition to her god as he sought the taste of her arousal. Her body went partially limp in surrender and he supported her even as she tore her nails across his hide. His hearts raced as she moaned her pleasurable suffering in tune to the measures he took to savor her.

Maggie didn't understand how she could be so sore and ache so much to have him again. Her insides felt raw and bruised but the heaviness of

yearning still pooled in her lower abdomen, threatening to spill over at his encouragement. Oh hell, he would push her to the precipice whether she was ready to be there or not and pull her back from the edge repeatedly if he wanted to. She was well aware of his proficiency at doing \_that\_.

"Iruu...I want..." even at her feeble attempt to protest, his strong grip restrained her against his face. As she tried to find the words to beg for some leniency she moved her body in time to his prompting despite the painful void of wanting more.

Time and again he had ceded control to her in that precious moment. The physical aches that would linger for days deep inside were her own doing. He had never forced or been rough. And, even though she had always found fulfillment, had reveled in all of him she could take, there remained an unspoken longing.

She wriggled violently and her knees buckled. Grabbing onto his forearms for support as she fell, Maggie heard Iruu hiss disapproval as she forcefully wrenched away from him. Slipping through his arms and kneeling across his legs, her hands trembled as she tore at the arms of the bodysuit still tied neatly around his waist. As she nipped at his chest he complied, defaulting to submission and toeing the zips at his feet, struggling blindly to shed the obtrusive garment.

Their bodies sought alignment even as Maggie whimpered her complaint and shifted, rolling onto her back on the floor. She tugged at his arms and shoulders, shoved at his chest, used her thighs and knees to prod him, urging him into position above her. Iruu followed hesitantly, lapping at her neck, uncertain even as she reached to pull against his hips and tried to hook her legs around his waist.

"Iruu, \_please\_," she cried.

'Loram struggled for air and felt his right arm quake. It had little to do with the grief of his muscles. He had relinquished control time and again because there was desperation in his desire not to hurt her. Facts of divergence remained just as distinct as those of convergence; and previous strategic arrangements had been exceptionally pleasurable despite certain physical limitations. Those limits were hers to dictate.

"\_Please\_," she whispered vehemently at his qualm, miserable, needy tears spilling from her eyes as she traced a hand along his stomach and grabbed hold of him.

Folding his lower mandibles over his upper, and biting down hard against his own face, Iruu collapsed to his elbows over her and nuzzled her shoulder, propping his forehead against the floor with a defeated moan as he instinctively chased the movement. Even as she guided and he sought, he could feel her tense beneath him, wholly uncertain but desperate.

He advanced carefully, deepening only at her prompting. She could feel her body shudder as physical tenderness and carnal desire vied for respite, repeatedly voicing agreement and seeking more as they found a slow, easy rhythm.

The knowledge that this was what she wanted tore at everything inside. He felt as if a storm had upturned the foundation of his understanding of what she needed from him. The floor was unforgiving and Iruu fought to hold himself back, claws scraping and varnish peeling as he tried not to give in to what he wanted. Even at her continued, insistent pleas he could not let himself believe she knew what she was asking.

Maggie pushed against his every subdued movement, feeling every inch he would give her, gasping at the sensation of being full of him. But, she wanted more. It wasn't out of self-loathing, or the need to be punished...she wanted to know he wanted her, even the parts he didn't understand, even the parts that were screwed up and broken.

Tears burned Maggie's eyes and she miserably cried his name. He growled into her neck and she felt his body tremble. The increasingly ragged sound of his breathing and the way he began trying to contain choking groans gave away his effort to restrain himself. She softly bucked beneath him, whispering his name again and felt him clench his jaws and heard him whimper into her hair. He tried to maintain control even as he pushed deeper and the physical sensation was enough to shove her over the edge.

Maggie bit him, hard, tasting the oily tartness of his sweat as she tried to pull him farther and drag him with her. He issued an ardent hiss and she writhed against him. She could feel the twitch of his mandibles and the hot, sticky sweetness of his breath as he panted and still desperately tried to restrain himself even as he thrust harder. Her summit fell away and she clung to him as he mindlessly ran his mouth across her shoulder, her neck, licking the tear stains from her face.

The depth of intimacy was terrifying as he felt the spiral of the repeated, empty experiences of their pasts reached for one. She wanted him, and not for the status her family could attain, not because she was afraid to refused, and not because societal norms said she should, but because she wanted him. Her desire to be taken and his desire to possess wound together without the necessity of justification beyond desire.

He braced himself aggressively over her and Maggie smiled as he found the force of his own hunger and finally give in to it. He snarled wanton misery, curling his neck to press his forehead to hers. She could feel his mouth quiver against her skin as he began running his lips down her cheek and across her neck. Then, in breathless tune to his increasingly aggressive movements, he began to speak. Words she didn't understand spilled from his trembling mandibles. Meeting abandon, he had reverted to his native language and it was the single most erotic thing Maggie had ever heard.

Praise, recognition, affection, oh hell, he could have been saying anything but she knew those words were of genuine desire—and they were for her. He whispered her name and collected his knees, taking hold of her hips and mercilessly driving into her fully. She locked her legs around his waist as she tumbled helplessly from the pinnacle again. Maggie threw her head back, screaming into the abyss as she felt the throb of his release.

He collapsed over her, propping himself on wobbly arms and they lay

there, panting in unison, neither of them making a move to disengage. The rush receded, leaving the weightless tingle of fulfillment dancing across their skin in its wake. Reluctant to break the spell, Maggie wagered only to open her eyes and found herself staring up into his. She smiled and Iruu softly returned the expression. He dipped his snout to her cheek, unashamed in the knowledge that the tears he began lapping from her face were his own.

## 21. Chapter 21

### Chapter Twenty-One

```
_**Date Redacted**_**
>Generation Two Unconventional AI Serial Number 62-0229-B<br>AI Self
Identification: Hilda
>Programming Imprint Designator: AMELIA BRUNHILDA
SCHMITZ<br>Transmission Origin: **_**Redacted**__**

><strong>_**Recipient(s): **_**Redacted, Redacted**__**

><strong>_**Classification: Alpha/ Eyes Only
>Reference: Program and subsequent Mission Code Name Double
Helix<br>**_**Timestamp**__**Redacted**_
```

Confirmed catalog located in triple firewall encryption compiled and previously retained by Unauthorized Clone Generation One Unconventional AI Signe. File breached and decoded by Generation Two Unconventional AI Hilda. Index contains full genetic profiles on all official and unauthorized test subjects and point of origin as relates to referenced Program Code.  
>[LINK] disabled<p>

Confirmed translight projections located in triple firewall encryption as compiled and previously retained by Unauthorized Clone Generation One Unconventional AI Signe. File breached and decoded by Generation Two Unconventional AI Hilda. Index contains destination points for unaccounted UNSC Prison Classification vessels\_ Las Meninas, Night Watch \_and \_Guernica\_ as relates to referenced Program Code.  
>[LINK] disabled<p>

All information and file notes for Program and Mission Code referenced have been categorized and classified; transferred to Generation Three Unconventional AI \_Redacted\_.

Doctor Jay, Debra Elise: Retained at ONI location \_Redacted \_under Wildfire Protocol sub-classification 33-F-127 under direct order from Lord Terrance Hood. All methods at extraction authorized.

Biological construction L'shi: Retained at ONI sub-location \_Redacted\_ with full disclosure and access to select parties. Protocol classification pending.

Related Mission Code Status: COMPLETE.

All UNSC and allied parties debriefed and returned to respective assignment.

\_UNSC Hell Hath No Fury\_\_

><em>Status: Mission Ready  
>Location: Sol System<br>AI: Hilda  
>Intelligence Status: Pending file purge<p>

\_UNSC Deoxy\_\_  
><em>Status: Salvage  
>Location: <em>Redacted<em>\_  
><em>AI: Signe  
>Intelligence Status: Terminated<p>

Feral Flood contaminants related to Program and Mission Code  
referenced neutralized in accordance with \_Redacted\_.

Ambrosia II: Beta Centauri System, UEG Colonized  
>Official Status: Unknown- Presumed glassed<br>Classified Status:  
\_Redacted\_  
><em>[LINK] disabled

{{{Transmitting AI requests matrix PURGE of all files, associated  
context, and programming retained under this Program and Mission Code  
in accordance with \_Redacted\_ for AI return to Mission Ready Status  
and link with Long Range Scanning Probes}}}

{{{Request CONFIRMED}}}

\* \* \*

><p><strong>29 November 2563<br>Sol System  
>Earth<br>ONI Complex Delta  
>1300 Local<strong>

Jay tried to gasp for air as the consuming torment of sleep  
dissipated like a puff of smoke in the breeze. Nothing about her body  
would cooperate with her tortured attempts to suck in more oxygen  
save her gaping mouth; wild, searching right eye; and clouded gill  
which winked frantically from the left socket. The stark, blinding  
light of a sterile suite greeted her and pricked her vision as she  
blinked up at the ceiling. A cardiac monitor droned out a panicked  
but stabilizing melody as the hiss and fizz of a respiration monitor  
providing accompaniment. Jay could just make out an oblong, opaque  
bag dangling from an IV stand and knew the leads and lines that ran  
in neat coils were attached to her from various machines around the  
room.

Technicians scurried about paying the paralyzed subject no attention,  
their focuses on data pads and monitor readouts.

"One nine point three seven 'til confirmed REM; oh one point one six  
'til cardiac arrest," someone said impassively.

\_One minute and sixteen seconds of sound sleep, \_Jay repeated in her  
head.

It had felt like an eternity, it always did.

She could feel the burn of AED probes attached to her left shoulder  
and right ribcage and had lost count of how many times the  
technicians had drugged her in an attempt to get what they wanted;  
changing doses, no doubt rearranging meds and playing with  
combinations in order to find one which would yield the desired

result.

Sleep was something which was biologically unnecessary for her contaminated form, but required for forced, live-subject imprinting. Because of her own manipulation, they could not imprint her brain in accordance with protocols written and first completed successfully by Doctor Catherine Halsey. Those measures were useless against a system contaminated with the determination to consume and retain.

Debra refused to submit her mind for imprinting, it was the only thing she had left, and the Flood genome gave her the ability to quite literally lock the information down by power of will. In the struggle for control, the ONI technicians and medical personnel assigned to the program set aside for information extraction had found themselves having to employ alternative measures to coerce cooperation. The alternative was to induce sleep, sedate her, or put her in a coma. Even these were proving unsuccessful strategies. Jay had no control over her mind in such states, and that turned out to be a curse for both the immobile doctor and the imprinting and extraction team.

The level of terror Debra experienced during those times was measurable only in the minutes it took for her to go into full cardiac arrest. With the restraint of conscious control removed, images, sensations, and voices rose from the recesses of her mind to run wild. Memories, thoughts, and experiences of the thousands of human and alien subjects tortured and slaughtered so she could attain such knowledge inundated and seized control of her perception.

Drawing a breath and closing her eye against mental agony, Jay mused how desperately she wished to go the rest of her natural life never sleeping again. In her current state that was completely possible. If the technicians would stop their meddling she could exist never having to see those images or hear the ghosts of their torment and rage.

An AI materialized in life size form nearby and leaned over to look down at Jay's face. Having selected the image of a well groomed, young doctor, Oliver projected himself in an obnoxious shade of green.

Jay had heard the assisting technicians comment that he was a third generation unconventional model. The irony of an upgraded version of her own work now devoted to her care and repeated methods of interrogation and research was not lost on Debra.

"Hello," Oliver said sweetly, "Welcome back. Did we have a nice visit?"

The subject sneered wordlessly up at him, a line of drool leaking from the corner of her mouth to slide along her face and ooze into her hair.

"Don't want to talk about it, hum?" the AI chirped, cocking his head.

Jay just bared her teeth and hissed up at him.

Oliver crinkled his face and leaned back, "Pity," he sang, neon



data pausing for the briefest of seconds before scrolling on at a leisurely pace, "\_You have been so very...useful,\_" he whispered, straightening to walk the length of the bed to which Jay was bound.

The cardiac monitor bleated out an increased rhythm. \_No, \_Debra thought, \_it isn't possible. \_

Oliver consulted with one of the technicians, giving his words time to fester and germinate. He had full access to all of Signe's files and he could feel and remember and knew how the woman now helplessly lying on the exam bed had manipulated and caused so much misery; how desperately Signe wanted to see her suffer and die. She had certainly suffered and would continue to do so. Biopsies, exploratory tests, amputations, all scheduled for the days and month come even without the ability to put her under because of the risk cardiac failure. It would all require such delicate orchestration.

As he focused in on the current readout of interest to the technicians, Oliver mulled the terminated AI's memories over, and though revenge seeking behavior was undignified of a stable intelligence, there was really only one thing he imagined Jay should think as he methodically tortured her in the name of information gathering. Signe was \_going \_to win, and Oliver wanted Jay to know it as he waited for the final tests to be run and procedures to be completed so he could get approval to seize her brain.

Turning, the AI walked to the head of the table to look down at Jay, her blue eye wide and searching. "Make no mistake, we will play this game until \_I \_tire of it, \_Doctor Jay,\_" he frowned for a moment. Then, he leaned closer and she tried to flinch against the straps that held her head in place as his face contorted and flashed for a fraction of a second to that of a snarling German shepherd, "\_Tell me, how does it feel to know I will kill you back\_?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>29 December 2563<br>Sol System  
>Earth<br>Outside Camp Odin  
>Bay Shore Condominiums<br>2330 Local\*\*

Maggie looked herself over in the mirror, noting the dark circles under her eyes and the way her hair refused to lay down on the right side of her head. She needed more sleep, and a haircut. The pink of her tank top showed off how desperately pale she was but Whittaker did her best to ignore that as she stepped into OD green flip-flops that roughly matched her knee length, cut-off cargo shorts. She plunked down the stairs and out of her house, double checking the door locks before turning to walk to her truck. The lot was well lit despite the hour. Headlights flashed and the closed top, four door, civilian class Warthog chirped happily at her approach. It was shiny and silver, backed into one of the reserved spots between her orange, two-seat, sixteen cylinder antique sports coup and a mud covered dune buggy on its small trailer. Whittaker had never been one for \_things\_. She loved her beach front condo and it kept her from having to put up with on-camp enlisted housing. Other than that, she had spent the last thirteen years donating substantial credits to orphanages and animal shelters, but not really spending anything on herself. That began to change over the last few months.

Whittaker had begun to realize just how much she kept inside and how that had prevented her from seeing the people she did have as her family. It wasn't perfect, in fact, it was pretty damned dysfunctional, but Zeta was her family nonetheless and every one of them loved her, in their own way. If she ever hoped to be able to express how grateful she was for that, she had to start learning to love herself.

Sanders shuffled over and opened a rear door, plopping himself uncomfortably across the seats. He was in blue plaid pajama pants and a gray hooded pullover, tufts of hair on his crown going crazy directions and bleary eyed as he flopped an arm across his face and yawned, "Wake me up when we get there."

Maggie laughed and shut the door before climbing in and starting the vehicle.

Paul didn't live in the complex, but Charlotte Winchester did. Which was convenient. Maggie knew Beth was done jerking the third-time Staff Sergeant's ass out of the fire. The Chief Warrant Officer had no reason to be worried about Vice Admiral Winchester causing a serious ruckus, especially now that Charlotte's commission was up and she was a fully civilian engineering contractor. Oh, Daddy Dearest could still make noise, but there wasn't much he could really do other than get his blood pressure up. Admiral Holley was still over Spec Ops and he tended to tune a deaf ear to personally motivated nonsense.

Beth's only concern was that Paul was so smitten with the girl he would try to marry her now that his career and balls were not in immediate jeopardy. Maggie and the team leader had never really talked much, but at a recent post-mission team barbeque Steele had voiced her concern. While the guys were off searching for driftwood for a bonfire, Whittaker and Beth had sat on the deck looking out at the ocean and that was the moment it all started to click together for Maggie.

Beth never had anything against Charlotte, it was just that Paul's involvement with her could have gotten him ejected from Spec Ops, and now that that was no longer an issue, if he married her, he would no longer meet specifications for the IRD. She would probably never admit it, but Whittaker came to realize Steele didn't want to lose Paul in the same way a mom didn't want to lose her baby boy.

"I use to wonder..." she had shaken her head against the thought, "Teddy says there isn't any need to wonder," then she had looked over at Maggie and smiled, "We already know what our kids would have been like."

It was the closest thing to a complement Maggie could imagine the other woman capable of, and Whittaker didn't have it within herself to tell Steele that Paul wasn't the only one she had to worry about losing.

Beth had laughed, "Sometimes, the second chance you get just isn't one you ever imagined in your head."

Maggie eased her SUV out into non-existent traffic and made her way several blocks north towards camp before pulling into a gated apartment complex. Teddy and Beth were waiting with their bags on the

curb as she pulled up and hit the hatch release. Steele climbed in the front passenger seat wearing a brightly colored sarong and buff colored sandals. Beth had never struck Maggie as the dress type.

Teddy loaded up their bags, the bright orange and yellow Hawaiian print of his cargo shorts at odds with the red and white dive flag on his black shirt and flip-flops. He lumbered to the back and jabbed at Paul to get him to sit up and get out of the way.

At 0000 hours on the dot, Zeta was pulling up to garrison headquarters. Maggie parked in the General's vacant spot and everyone piled out. They were all officially signed out and on much needed leave for the next nine days at 0015.

Maggie dropped Teddy and Beth off at the airport in plenty of time for them to catch their 0200 redeye out of the country. They were going somewhere tropical and sunny to ring in the New Year, with romantic sunsets instead of the gloomy, humid winter storms that plagued the coastal southeast. Maggie knew Las Rattan, just off of Old Haiti, was their favorite hide-a-way. At team cook-outs she had seen snap shots all over Beth's apartment of the two of them on the white sand beach and in the shade of a thatched bungalow.

In the pictures, Maggie saw a side of them she had never really had the chance to notice, and maybe, it was her own change in perspective that caused her to see it. Teddy had come inside to fish a beer out of the fridge and paused next Whittaker as she looked over a collage of candid shots: Teddy and Beth at a floating oyster bar; on a deep sea fishing boat; the two of them looking at each other as they were both caught open mouthed in some bar with microphones in their hands and a karaoke machine in the background.

"You really love her, don't you?"

Danniskovovik had just stood there for a few moments, "Yeah," he said before tugging at his beer, "Even when I shouldn't have; even when she gave me every reason not to," his big shoulders rose and fell in a shrug, "For all the things she is and all the things she isn't, I've always loved her," and with that, the giant man of very few words had turned and walked away.

As she slowed the Warthog near unit 27 and Sanders climbed out, Whittaker thought to just let it go, but at the last minute she rolled the window down and hollered at him. Paul turned back, still sleepy faced and rubbing his eyes.

"You know, um," she began, clearing her throat as he approached.

He leaned in and folded his arms across the open window rail, propping his chin on his forearms, "Somethin' wrong, Maggie?"

She breathed out slowly and fought the butterflies in her stomach that kicked up at what she was about to broach, "You remember about a year ago," she paused and chewed at a nail, "when Charlotte got engaged to that ass-hole from Naples?"

Sanders' face fell. His eyes went wide as he stood bolt upright and jumped back from the truck. He had visibly blanched as if all the blood had drained out of his head. His words blurted out in a rush,

"We said we were never going to talk about that."

"I know," Maggie held up a hand.

"Is this one of those twelve-steps?"

"Yesâ€|no, yes, just, hear me out, okay?"

He looked at her as if she had suddenly turned into a venomous snake. They were never supposed to talk about that nightâ€|everâ€|with anybodyâ€|ever. Paul couldn't remember most of it, but he was weirded out about it just the same. Maggie was kind of like, \_his sister, \_his really hot sisterâ€|but, noâ€|that was justâ€|eww.

Feeling like he might need to throw up, he still found himself nodding, swallowing hard at what he was sure would probably put him in the emotional equivalent of the fetal position.

\_Not the way he wanted to spend the next nine days with Charlotte.

—

"We never had sex that night, Paul," Whittaker said flatly.

He blinked, "We didn't?"

"No," Maggie shook her head.

"But," Sanders protested, "the hospital report said..."

"I \_know \_what it said, Paul, because \_I'm \_the one who gave the account," she sighed, "I just wanted to \_shut you up\_," she said bitterly, "Besides, everyone knows I'mâ€|wellâ€|" she still had a hard time not thinking of herself that way, "You falling out of bed during wild sex sounded nicer at the time than \_'You wound up in the ER getting three stitches in your forehead; and had a mild concussion and a black eye because we were drunk and you pissed me off so I broke a lamp across your face'\_."

Paul subconsciously reached to rub the scar on his left temple, "Oh."

That was probably the only drunken encounter Maggie was actually thankful to recall with any degree of clarity precisely because of what \_didn't \_happen.

"And there was that whole potential for a battery chargeâ€|so I lied. To everyone," she took a ragged breath and hung her head, "I'm sorry, Paul. It was just easier to be what everyone alreadyâ€|"

"Naw, it's okay," he interrupted, "This just means we're not any weirder than we should be," he shrugged, "Shit happens and now we can go back to never talking about it again."

She looked over at him from the corner of her eye and saw his dimple-cheeked grin, "So, that's it? That's all you've got to say?"

"Yep."

Whittaker puffed out a breath, \_and why does that make me feel like

an even bigger ass-hole?\_

"I'm probably going to regret this," she muttered, reaching for the tangle of keys dangling from the console. She unclipped a dainty set and chucked them sideways. Sanders caught them as they smacked his chest, "That can't make up for what I did, but your car is a four cylinder and smells like dirty socks."

"Heyâ€|"

"And if you're going to flaunt your relationship with Vice Admiral Winchester's daughter while you're on leave, you should at least do it in something classy."

Paul chuckled, looking over at the small orange sportster tucked into its spot, "You're not all that bad stuff you think you are, Maggie," he said in a low voice. Then, he made a face like something tasted bad and slapped the window frame and muttered, "It's way too early for this heavy shit." With that he tucked the keys into his pocket and turned to walk away.

"Scratch it and I'll kill you," Maggie shouted at his back.

Paul just laughed as he keyed his way into Charlotte's condo and Whittaker threw the truck in drive and pulled back out of the lot.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>31 December 2563<br>Sol System  
>Earth<br>Outside Camp Odin  
>Sangheili Allied Station<br>0230 Local\*\*

Command Officer 'Loram sat at the desk in his now, seldom used, Commandant's office. The room occupied a large portion of the upper floor of the command building. Neat and organize, it had become a place of last resort for necessary paperwork and associated duties of Iruu's station. Sometimes, he felt as if he were drowning in reports, forms, and memos: work which had once been the only part of his job he could honestly say he participated in.

He pecked back and forth from two data pads and a stationary terminal which canted up from the immaculate desktop. He loathed this part of his job. There were other things he wished to be doing, somewhere else he would prefer to be...but, he needed to get these forms corrected for approval and do his best not to compose and eloquently scathing request to Military Commander 'Vadum for permission to go kill the bureaucratic wretch at the other end of the transmissions.

Once a man with endless patience for the tedious electronic trail of approval and requests, Iruu was now woefully short on the subject. Some of the irritation was residual from facing the damage incurred after years of his own complacency. The previous months had left him facing the guilt of having been a leader who had allowed his men to make fools of themselves simply because he had not felt it his place to chasten those in his charge for their private conduct; he hadn't cared; he hadn't wanted to know...

Iruu snarled and slammed his fist against the desktop. He no longer believed he was sent on the mission with the humans because he was

disposable. True, he was convenient but he had also been jaded and discontent and derelict in addressing the greater scope of his responsibilities. Not to mention completely oblivious. Now he was frustrated because the fix was not as easy as ignoring the issue had been. The Allied Station on Earth was intended to be a proving ground, not a...another Nustaad. But, that was exactly what he had allowed it to become.

The Ambassador's had approved of the changes manifest in the Commandant, as did 'Vadum and the Arbiter. They had all been most agreeable to the adjustments Iruu returned and immediately began requesting and helpful in seeing those requests were fulfilled. But, there was still so much paperwork involved.

'Loram growled and tapped at the terminal, sending off the revised transmission of his latest request. He attached a copy of the submit confirmation to a memorandum, edited out a few lines typed in haste and sent the whole thing to 'Vadum and the Arbiter. It was not his habit to circumvent procedure, but it was late...or, early, and he was tired.

Making changes to his subordinate chain of command was proving much more difficult than he imagined. He did not see why the Field Master and Field Marshal who had requested qualified asylum and assignment as his subcommanders would be such a difficult thing to make happen. 'Taham and 'Sroam had given their unwavering approval and Iruu had already sent his last two subcommanders away. After overhearing their grumblings over the fact that no one under his command was allowed to leave the grounds except on official business, Iruu had wanted to kill them both but had elected to recommend them for duty on a prison ship instead.

Iruu was done hearing his men talking about the bars they frequented and the humans they messed around with, threat to the alliance or not. He had practically replaced all of his cadre and found himself beating nine hells out of the rookies who tried to sneak off the station. What he once saw as an assignment of last resort; a promotion intended to make use of him in service to a political agenda, 'Loram now took with lethal seriousness.

He refused to feel sorry for himself any longer or sit back and think himself a pawn in the Arbiter's ongoing quarrel with the High Council of Sanghelios. No, 'Loram had quite deliberately interjected himself into the middle of all that via his position, much to 'Vadam's silent, but clear, approval. The civil wars on the homeworld seemed unending: bitter, miserable flare-ups over antiquated cultural and religious values and civil laws seemed to have become the status quo. While 'Vadam did his best to be a voice of reason and find a balance between the archaic demands of old and the sweeping change many embraced, Iruu simply enjoyed being a thorn in the Council's collective side. To have a condemned man egging on what they felt was lascivious discontent which could lead to unnecessary but outright civil rebellion gave credence to his paternal lineage, a name still forbidden even to be spoken. Rumor was currently circulating that the Ascetics were considering making a play for his head.

Ambassador 'Taham found this latest development to be as flattering as Iruu did. And it was during the course of orchestrating desired changes within his command structure that Iruu came to realized just how inattentive to his surroundings he had been. 'Taham and 'Sraom

operated under the same shroud of protection provided by 'Vadum and the Arbiter he did. Legal condemnation and the threat of death bound them to asylum on Earth just as surely as it did Iruu. They were not fated through the actions of another, but by their own willful defiance of cultural norms. Where once Iruu wondered why such young men with an abundance of life ahead of them would wish to remain on Earth instead of going home, he realized home had nothing but hatred and the treat of death. The Ambassadors loved one another and, while Sangheili acknowledged the fact that homosexuality was a statistical likelihood; it was still frowned upon, especially for men early in their reproductive prime. The fact that they had flouted cultural norms and become bonded was enough for them to be marked by the sitting Council.

This revelation led Iruu to a deeper understanding of what the Arbiter was doing. 'Vadam had been the first to do what no Arbiter was supposed to: he lived. And he did so to watch the empire which branded him a heretic fall; something his continued leadership threatened to do to the very council he defied by not only harboring fugitives to an antiquated system of justice but by setting those men at the head of his table. 'Loram also came to understand 'Vadum's participation was out of a shared indignation that men of such ability could be cast aside because of a system of rules which sought to punish based on abstract ideals rather than objective evidence.

Which was why Iruu wanted the men who had requested assignment to be approved. They were both very capable and their asylum was qualified because they did not wish to come to Earth as civilians in order to escape the Council's wrath, but they would if they had to: not for themselves, but each for another.

Grunting irritably at his exhaustion, 'Loram shut down the terminal and collected up the data pads. He had been doing all of this on his own for over a month, a few hours was not going to make a dent in the forms and memos left and no one would die if he left them until daybreak.

He yawned as he stood, neatly pushing his chair to the desk, and again as he stepped out into the hall and heard the door slide closed and lock behind him.

The night's sky was obscured by dark, laden clouds as he walked across the parade field to the command quarters. Every now and then a breeze would kick up and Iruu could smell the salt air from the nearby ocean.

As he approached a drab gray, four-story cinder block building, it began to lightly drizzle. Iruu placed his hand on the pad near the main door and the device recognized his palm print, unlocking and rolling open with a hollow thud. Stepping into the cozy interior, Iruu took an immediate left and climbed the three flights of polished stairs to the upper floor. He made the landing and strolled down to the only door on the left. The entire west side of the floor was his apartment, and those to the east would be occupied by his subcommanders...eventually.

Iruu pressed one of his thumbs against a small panel that was affixed high on the wall next to the door and it receded into the casing. His personal quarters were as neat as his office, though decidedly more

decorative of late. 'Loram walked through the tidy living space, past the kitchen, and down the hall to his personal office. He set his data pads on his desk and left them there so as to resist the urge to lay in bed and keep working.

As he stepped across the hall and into the spacious sleeping quarters Iruu smiled at the sight of Maggie sprawled partially beneath the blankets, her form highlighted by the faint blue glow of her data pad. She was asleep, her head tucked against a pillow, a hand still touching the device's surface.

The past two months had not been easy. 'Loram was not accustomed to being the one left behind to wait and wonder, and the strain of that had been painful. Still, Maggie always came home to him, staying in her own residence only when practicality indicated. They were faithful to one another and the human woman had become as much a fixture on his bed as his bedsheets, as a present in his life as his assigned station. He had learned to let it be enough to know she loved him, even if she didn't know how to say it.

Iruu slid the data pad carefully from her beneath her hand and lifted it to see a picture of L'shi. The human-Sangheili girl smiled back at him covered in mud, perched inside Maggie's dune buggy. What the human intelligence community intended to do with the child 'Loram could not rightly know, but the officer assigned to her care had gone above and beyond to see to it Maggie saw her as often as was permitted. And, Maggie seemed content in the knowledge Hursch and his wife were raising the child as and with their own, albeit on a secure installation.

Maggie's concern for L'shi had once baffled Iruu, but it came to be a quality which endeared him to her even more. That she was so openly capable of acceptance unconditional had changed him and he understood how even a man as vicious as Legion Master 'Berovai could be encouraged to change under the weight of unexpected kindness.

There was no immediate worry Daniel's world would be disrupted. The UNSC had readily agreed to let the planet be, but Iruu was certain that was owed primarily to 'Vadam's powers of persuasion. Either way, it was a concern for another day and another person.

Iruu powered the data pad off and set it aside before stepping to the adjoining walk-in closet and stripping of his armor. Maggie had not moved when he walked back into the room and he found her gloriously naked beneath the covers as he snuggled in next to her. She scooted close and draped an arm across his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. 'Loram smiled to himself.

"I learned something today," she said with a yawn.

Iruu hummed, looking down to run his fingers through her hair. She was always excited to recount what she had learned about his culture and how to pronounce words from Ensign Hursch. It had become their custom to discuss the finer nuances and talk about it for hours.

He kissed her forehead, "It can wait until morning," he assured her softly.

Maggie shook her head and pushed herself up, rubbing at her eyes then resting her cheek against his. She kissed the side of his face and



whispered three words in perfect Sangheili; three words he never imagined she would understand or that he would ever hear her say in any language, "\_I am yours\_."

\* \* \*

><p>Epilog<p>

\*\*2564, January 1

>Generation Three Unconventional AI Serial Number 63-1023-C<br>AI  
Self Identification: Oliver  
>Programming Imprint Designator: LINBURG SIGNE  
TOLLOVINSKI<br>Transmission Origin: ONI Complex Delta, Earth

>Recipient(s): Lord Admiral Hood, Terrance; Admiral Osmund,  
Serin<br>Classification: Alpha Level/ Eyes Only  
>Reference: Jay, Debra Elise<br>19:00:00 Zulu\*\*

Application of Altered Genetic Retardation Protocols  
ineffective.

Subject unresponsive to all hitherto applied methods of information  
extraction.

Methods exhausted.

All retrievable data extrapolated from physical  
subject.

Calculations indicate likelihood of successful information retrieval  
by continued application of all utilized methods as 00.000000096%.  
Variance -00.000000019%.

Calculations indicate likelihood of successful information retrieval  
diminish by a factor of 00.0057% every 24 hour  
cycle.

{{{Transmitting AI requests subject termination and immediate  
Cerebrum Imprinting and manual information download}}}

{{{Request CONFIRMED}}}

\* \* \*

><p><strong>3 January 2564<br>Sol System  
>Earth<br>Outside Camp Odin  
>Oceanside Apartments<br>1030 Local\*\*

A chime sounded and the familiar musical note was followed by a  
series of tones announcing Bleu's presence. The AI materialized atop  
a data pad perched on the edge of a countertop. Bleu sighed, folding  
his arms as he glowered at a fogged over glass shower door spilling  
lustful moans and steamy plumes.

"Hate to intrude," he grouched.

A period of silence was followed by Gunnery Sergeant Danniskovivik's  
gravley voice, "You son of a bitch."

Chief Warrant Officer Steele's laughing face emerged as she slid the

door back just enough to turn her head and see the cobalt AI patting his digital boot, "Ma'am," he said just before Teddy's face peeked from the opening somewhere in the region of Beth's hip.

The old ODST gave Bleu an evil glare, "We're kinda' on leave and I'm in the middle of something here," Danniskovovik hissed.

The AI humphed and Beth cackled.

"Leave's been cancelled," Bleu barked.

The senior members of Zeta looked at each other for a moment then turned back and in unison, "Why?"

"Oh, you know they don't tell me much," Bleu said with a sly grin, "But, word is, some top level ONI secret sniffing equipment plugged into the mainframe of a outer colonial information banking station on the known boarder looking for some leads. The sniffers poked around a few files, got some close hits on a handful genetic markers, including one that matches David Parangosky's DNA."

"David\_ James\_ Parangosky, as in..." Steele began.

"As in, she'll probably come back from the great beyond and beat him to death with her cane; Admiral Margaret Orlinda Parangosky's great-grand-nephew; yep, that's be the one," Bleu said with a nod.

"What's that got to do with leave being cancelled?"

"How recent is the..." Beth began.

The AI held his hands up then shifted and winked, "I just know it's been assigned to the AI whose fragment matched the sequence and she requested your team specifically. Command agreed, and she want's your asses recalled pronto, and I ain't never going to say no to a fine lady like Hilda."

Teddy looked up at Beth and she gazed down at him, bobbing her eyebrows and running her tongue suggestively along her plump bottom lip. Bleu sighed heavily and shook his head as Steele's laughter filled the room and Teddy reached to close the shower door.

"Five minutes, Bleu."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>End Note: <strong>A huge thank you to those who have been with me from the start on this. Ny'Kle, KATT9033, Lyndakey1, and LSP Reviewer, you guys have really kept me encouraged. Though a deeply personal issue caused me to take the story down and lose all of your beautiful reviews I am grateful to have had your support these last six months. To Nelani (I hope I spelled that right), Stuff, the anonymous Guest, and all the other people which I know I am forgetting off the top of my head, thank you. And finally, a special thanks to Barbarette and KATT9033, your concern was touching.

I wish to acknowledge WarlordFil for inspiring the 'Taham/'Sraom paring that was mentioned in this chapter. Though our personal takes on unknown Halo canon don't really converge, her writing inspired

this piece of fanfiction.

End  
file.